

RUNNING HEAD: TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING THEORY

Transformational Learning Theory:

A new theory for adult learning

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Key Concepts and Principles

A new learning theory was developed in 1978 by Jack Mezirow. The theory focuses on a newly discovered way that people learn, and is called Transformational Learning. According to Baumgartner, “transformational learning, which can occur gradually or from a sudden, powerful experience, changes the way people see themselves and their world (Baumgartner, p. 16).” Because of the nature of this theory, it has been used widely in adult education. The theory is generally called one of two things: transformative learning, or transformational learning. As previously mentioned by Baumgartner, this theory transforms the way people see the world and their role inside that world.

Mezirow was the first person to develop the theory, but there are others who have worked with his ideas and developed the theory more. The three other theorists that should be mentioned are: Robert Boyd, Paulo Freire and Larry Daloiz. Each has their own unique take on transformational learning and how it affects education, especially in teaching adults. Dirkx states “transformative learning reflects a particular vision for adult education and a conceptual framework for understanding how adults learn (Dirkx, p. 1).” The theoretical perspectives and the key factors that influence learning also vary slightly between each theorist.

Mezirow believes that “the transformative process is formed and circumscribed by a frame of reference. Frames of reference are structures of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual’s tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs and actions (Taylor, p. 5).” The frames of reference unique to each person are what Mezirow believes are the key factors that influence adult learning. Boyd proposed another thought in what he calls “transformative education (Dirkx, p.3).” Boyd states:

My concern is primarily with the expressive or emotional-spiritual dimensions of learning and integrating these dimensions more holistically and consciously within our daily experience of life. Self-knowledge, or knowledge of ourselves and the world, is mediated largely through symbols rather than directly through language (Dirkx, p.3).

Boyd believes that emotions, our spiritual nature, and beliefs play a large role in adult transformative learning. Freire and Daloz expand even more on this theory. Freire made his theory primarily after working with people in Latin America and Africa. He calls his theory “*conscientization* or consciousness-raising (Dirkx, p.1).” In his thoughts “critical consciousness refers to a process in which learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contests that influence and shape their lives (Dirkx, p.2).” He wanted his adult learners to have the skills to transform their worlds through critical consciousness, and be able to better themselves. Lastly, Daloz’s ideals deal with students who are in a developmental transition, and are looking to education to “help them make sense of lives whose fabric of meaning has gone frayed (Baumgartner, p. 16).” Basically he believes that all adult learners go through a transition in their mid-adult years, and use education to help them make sense of their world again. All of these ideas change the role of teachers that are using transformational learning to educate.

Teachers using transformational learning as their instructional approach need to have a learning environment that is “a safe, open, and trusting environment that allows for participation, collaboration, exploration, critical reflection, and feedback (Baumgartner, p. 20).” The teacher of transformational learning is more a guide and a challenger to help their students transform their thoughts and ideas into new learning. “Instructors who wish to facilitate transformative learning must create an environment that encourages and rewards intellectual openness (McGonigal, p.

2).” The main learning that takes place with such a learning environment will be a transformation of ideas within the student. For instance, a student may come in with the idea that the world is flat, but after having their idea challenged by their instructor and going through exploration, collaboration with peers, spending time on critical reflection and then getting feedback on their work, will probably come to the transformation of ideas that the world is round.

Teachers have many tools and strategies to help them with transformational instruction. Some of these strategies include: activating events and identifying current assumptions in students. “The activating event can be anything that triggers students to examine their thinking about the possible limitations of their understanding (McGonigal, p. 2)” on a topic chosen by the instructor. The teacher in this strategy is trying to show students their limited knowledge, challenge them to learn more about a topic, and also help their learning transform while they are discovering new ideas about a topic. Identifying current assumptions in students is another strategy that teachers can use when using transformational learning. “The best strategies for helping students identify their current assumptions all require that students explain their thinking (McGonigal, p. 2).” This means that a teacher should have students write, role play, or debate so the learner’s thoughts are being brought to the forefront on a given topic. The teacher can then use those student assumptions and challenge the student’s ideas to help with transformational learning.

Transformational learning is a powerful tool for changing people’s ideas, perceptions, thoughts and how they view themselves in their world. This is its greatest strength. “It is not what we know but how we know that is important (Baumgartner, p. 22).” A weakness for this theory is that it is hard to create the ideal learning environment, and that teachers need to realize

they are not always the factor in the transformation. “It would be naïve and silly for us as educators to think that we can always foster transformation (Dirkx, p.5).” As much as teachers want to control their learning environment, there are always outside factors, contacts and influences that affect our learners.

Transformational learning is always changing and the resources for this learning theory are ever growing. Some good sources for transformational learning are the PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning (retrieved from: <http://www.coe.iup.edu/ace/>), Stanford University's Newsletter on Teaching (retrieved from: <http://ctl.stanford.edu/Newsletter>), the articles on “New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education” no. 89, Spring of 2001, and the articles included in “New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education” no, 119, Fall of 2008.

Implications on Instruction

Transformational learning applies to learning and instructional environments because teachers are guiding their students through a new thought process. Transformational learning “is about change in the learners, and it is the kind of learning that occurs when individuals make meaning out of the world through experiences (Cercone p. 149).” Using a scaffolding technique while teaching with this theory creates one of the best uses for this theory. Also, to have transformational learning take place “learners need support to begin the process, and they must be actively involved as they incorporate new information into the old (Cercone p. 149).”

Applying transformational learning to an educational environment will improve the instruction because students have time for self-reflection about their world and what their role is inside that world. Transformational learning provides “opportunities to test and apply new

perspectives (McGonigal, p. 2)” that have been learned. As a result, students will transform old assumptions into new ones that make their knowledge of their world, situation, and participation in their environment and community better.

Real World Example

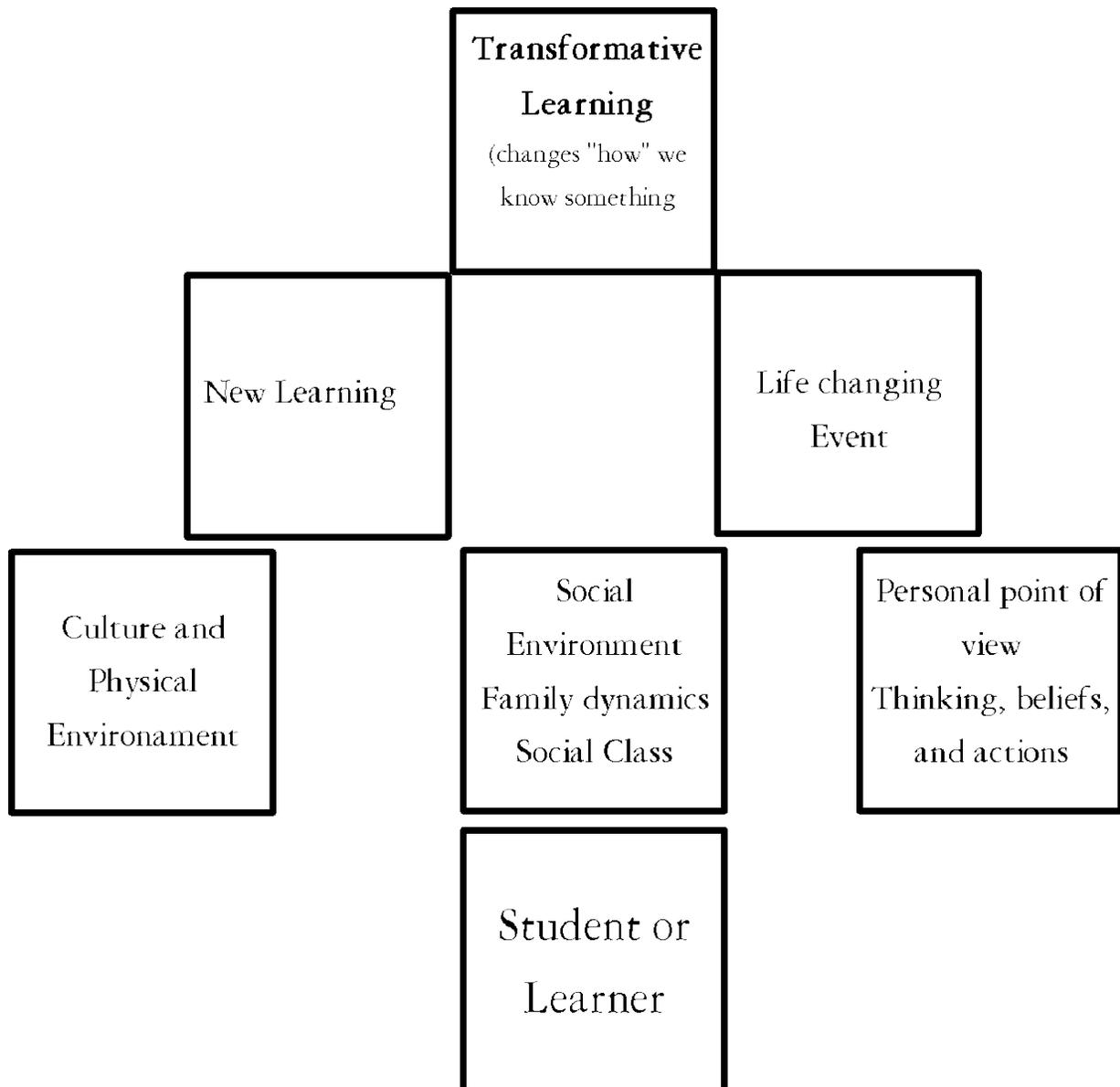
Through research, a real world example where transformational learning was used has been included below. This example speaks of how a teacher in an online course used a method to help her students use transformational learning while learning online.

Adults need to self-reflect on the learning process and be given support for transformational learning. [To do this, I] provided a place in the course to discuss the process of learning online that included thoughts on how my students are managing in the online course. I allowed students to discuss options for their new roles, plan action strategies and exchange knowledge and skills for effective and efficient online learning. I also provided ways for learning to engage in metacognitive reflection. My students will benefit from the use of thing logs, reflective journals, and the groups discussion within a cooperative learning setting (Cercone, p.159).

This example references a similar structure to the online learning theory course in the MIST program offered at CSUMB. Inside both the MIST course and the one mentioned above, learners are sharing their thinking through logs, journals and group discussions. This is vital for transformative learning because the instructor needs to know what the students think in order to help them transform their thoughts. One must remember that transformative learning won't always happen overnight. It is generally a process that is built upon over time. Instructors, if

creating the proper learning environment, will be the ones that guild learners, especially adult learners, through this process.

Included below is a *chart that shows how transformational learning is not a linear process, but that the transformation takes time and involves many factors.



*This chart was created by Wendy Page, and is not fact, just observation from the readings and research listed in the reference page.

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