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Transformation Theory - Postmodern Issues

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Abstract: This paper briefly comments on selected issues raised by postmodern writers regarding Transformation Theory, as developed by the author. Issues include situated learning, autonomy, teleology, meta-narratives, reason and the self. A brief summary of Transformation Theory will be available at this presentation.

There is much about the postmodern critique that both supports and challenges the validity of Transformation Theory. I agree with Foucault who interprets modernity and postmodernity as oppositional attitudes, present in any epoch or period, that assume a continuing critical dialectic, a discourse. As there are no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge and circumstances change, the human condition may be best understood as a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings. That is why transformative learning, with its emphasis on contextual understanding, critical reflection on assumptions and validating meaning through discourse, is so important. Milan Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* wisely suggests that if there were too much incontestable meaning in the world we would succumb under its weight.

Critical reflection of assumptions is at the heart of both postmodern critique and Transformation Theory. Both teaches us to be critical of all forms of foundationalism, of totalizing and definitive explanations and theories and the dominant take-for-granted paradigms. Both agree that the discourses of science, truth and progress cannot be taken for granted, and that we should be skeptical of all theories and frames of reference - including Transformation Theory and postmodernism. Both celebrate diversity and seek social justice. We have a mutual aim to avoid closure of certainty, seek openness to new experience with new and multiple meanings, accept the possibility of uncertainty and unpredictability while recognizing difference and otherness. We both reject the notion that 'emancipation' becomes a search for certainty and control through definitive knowledge, totalizing explanation and the elimination of difference. Both foster recognition of the tension between the goals of emancipation and democracy and the ubiquity of arbitrary power and oppression. Both seek to create multicultural learning environments free of sexist, racist and imperialistic discourses. To become critically reflective of assumptions leads postmodern and transformative thinkers to challenge the social consequences of any concept of reason, progress, autonomy, education, common humanity or emancipation.

However, there are significant differences between these two orientations. Perhaps the most important pertains to a tendency of postmodern critique to show how these concepts, historically associated with the Enlightenment and interpreted in the Western rational tradition, have tacitly produced negative social results and hence to categorically reject them in any form, regardless of their current reference or meaning. The negative judgment of how these concepts have historically functioned in society appears from the postmodern view to render them no longer

viable, regardless of their new or changing meaning in contemporary contexts, including Transformation Theory. They tend to become negative labels. Transformation Theory sees each of these concepts as contested meanings and respects the postmodern sensibility but, rather than throw out the baby with the bath water, attempts to redefine their meaning in a contemporary context of adult learning.

Situated Learning

The two ways of understanding differ in whether the content of a comprehensive learning theory must be dictated exclusively by cultural interests. The who, what, when, where, why and how of learning may be only understood as "situated" in a specific cultural context. Postmodern emphasis is on cultural relativity. This often results in writing off any effort to generalize beyond what is situated in a particular culture. Transformation Theory suggests a generic learning process that is interpreted and selectively encouraged or discouraged by contemporary cultures. It suggests that human beings have much in common, including their connectedness, their desire to understand and their spiritual incompleteness. Cultures enable or inhibit the realization of common human interests, ways of communicating and learning capabilities.

Insofar as their conditions and experience permit, adults in contemporary cultures tend to:

- (1) seek the meaning of their experience
- (2) engage in deliberate mindful efforts to learn
- (3) rely upon beliefs and understandings that produce interpretations and opinions that are more true or justified than those based upon other beliefs
- (4) accept others as agents with interpretations of their experiences that may prove true or justified
- (5) validate contested beliefs and understandings through reflective discourse - assess their supporting reasons and assumptions in order to arrive at a tentative best judgment - as a sometime alternative to resorting to tradition, authority or force to make a judgement
- (6) understand the meaning of what is communicated by becoming aware of the *assumptions* (intent, truthfulness, qualifications) of the person communicating and the truth, appropriateness and authenticity of what is being communicated
- (7) make meaning of our experience through acquired frames of reference - sets of orienting assumptions and expectations with cognitive, affective and conative dimensions - that shape, delimit and sometimes distort our understanding
- (8) transform our frames of reference by becoming critically reflective of their assumptions to make them more dependable when the beliefs and understandings they generate become problematic.

Mindful learning is defined by Langer (p. 4) as the continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information, and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective. Mindless learning involves relying on past forms of action or previously established distinctions and categories.

It is important to distinguish between the process of learning described above and adult education. While Transformation Theory holds that there are elements of a common learning process found within the experience of different cultures, there can be no question that education is always culturally "situated." Transformation Theory is a learning theory, but one that explicitly addresses adult educators. As an occupation, adult education, has historically been a cultural product of Europe and North America and has been identified with the development of autonomy, equality, social justice and democracy. For Transformation Theory, the meaning of these beliefs need to be validated through a continuing process of critical reflection on assumptions and discourse.

Autonomy as an Educational Goal

"...the postmodern critique 'stabs at the very heart of the most cherished ideals of Western culture [particularly that of] personal autonomy as an educational goal.'" (Usher and Edwards, p. 25) This view is predicated upon an assumption that autonomy and the exercise of individual agency involves fitting the individual into a culturally defined pre-cast "autonomous" mold that somehow denies the fact that the learner is *inscribed* - "constructed by discourses and signifying systems, decentered through language, society and the unconscious," (Usher and Edwards, *op.cit.*) "Emancipation," for the postmodern critic, is interpreted as a misguided search for certainty and control through deceptively definitive knowledge, totalizing explanations and the elimination of difference.

Clearly the postmodern critic is correct in pointing to the implication of the social order in the very being of the subject, the source of a tension which shapes the mutually interactive relationship between the subject and sociality, the constitutive social form. However, to then reify this relationship and depict the adult education process as a cultural cookie cutter and autonomy as fitting the learner into a precast mold, including a blind acceptance of current social injustice and exclusion, trapped by cultural assumptions and unable to become critically reflective of those inscribed by society, is an incomplete interpretation of autonomy at best. Usher and Edwards (p. 223) ask, "If 'emancipation' and 'knowledge' are chimeras deployed in the exercise of an omnipresent power, what point is there in challenging dominant practices?" These authors extol experiential learning as more in keeping with the postmodern sensibility than classroom instruction. But there is nothing about experiential learning that assures that it will be critically reflective of assumptions or that the validity of beliefs will be critically assessed through a continuing process of discourse of assessing supporting and opposing reasons. Transformative learning is learning to see *through* one's experience to discover what has been taken-for-granted.

To deny the potential of transforming frames of reference is to even preclude the possibility of the learner coming to share a postmodern perspective. The emancipatory process of fostering autonomy is precisely that of encouraging transformative learning through enhancing context

awareness, critical reflection of assumptions, discourse and reflective action. It is not movement from a false belief to a true one but rather from an unexamined to a critically examined belief.

For the postmodern critic, truth may be relative to discursive practices, but if it follows that any position is understood to be as good as any other, then there are no grounds for attempting to foster transformative learning to improve the quality of one's understanding or for fighting injustice or oppression. Transformation Theory holds that assertions are tested for truth empirically and, when this is not feasible, are assessed for their justification through a continuing process of critical discourse. We tentatively accept the beliefs and understandings that meet these tentative tests of validity when they generate opinions and judgments that are more dependable than those based upon other beliefs and understandings.

Transformative Theory as Teleology

A related postmodern view is to be categorically critical of the teleological. By definition, teleology imbues development with an order, purpose and goal. The issue there is whether or not that order, purpose and goal is tacitly imposed on the learner to move her from where she is to where the educator or society wants her to be - to conform to the desired outcome, "for her own good." This implies an effort to get the learner to agree with the educator's beliefs. Pietrykowski writes, "The power exercised by the adult educator...is...a means to structure and regulate learner behavior in accordance with a set of goals chosen by the educator." (p. 68)

There are two issues here. One is the question of who defines the objectives and goals of the educational process. In adult education, these decisions are, ideally, *negotiated* between the learner and the educator, not tacitly imposed by the educator. A second issue is the assumption that the function of adult education is to move the learner from a false way of thinking to a true one as defined by the educator. Transformation Theory is a description of a learning process by which the subject moves from an unexamined way of thinking to a more examined and critically reflective way and hence a more dependable way of interpreting meaning. The focus of the educator is on facilitating a continuing process of critical inquiry wherever it leads the learner. There are no "anticipated learning outcomes" in transformative learning.

As an educational theory, Transformation Theory is culturally based in Western democracy but is critically reflective in assessing democracy's inherent Telos. This holds that learners have the potential to become self-motivated and self-directed, rational, empathic, to participate in collaborative discourse and to become capable of exercising individual agency and to act reflectively.

As an educational theory, Transformation Theory's vision

...deals with how individuals may be empowered to learn to free themselves from unexamined ways of thinking that impede effective judgment and action. It also envisions an ideal society composed of communities of educated learners engaged in a continuing collaborative inquiry to determine the truth or arrive at a tentative best judgment about alternative beliefs. Such a community is cemented by empathic solidarity, committed to the social and political practice of participatory democracy, informed through critical reflection and would collectively take reflective action, when necessary, to assure that social systems

and local institutions, organizations and their practices are responsive to the human needs of those they service. (Mezirow, p. 72)

Transformation Theory as Meta-narrative

Lyotard (1984) writes that behind modern scientific knowledge is a meta-narrative, metadiscourse or grand narrative. This refers to a paradigm, an implicit frame of reference held in common. Humanistic discourse and the values of the Enlightenment are challenged as meta-narratives by postmodern thinkers who ask

"Whose reason and whose control? Progress for whom? Who becomes free? Who is cast as the Other, to be dominated and excluded?"...We need only remind ourselves of the power of terms such as 'progress', 'development', 'empowerment', 'emancipation' and 'enlightenment'...whatever emancipatory message they may contain can have oppressive consequences when 'emancipation' becomes a search for certainty and control through definitive knowledge, totalising explanations and the elimination of difference." (Usher and Edwards, p. 31)

These concepts may have indeed led to oppressive consequences when they "become a search for certainty and control through definitive knowledge, totalising explanations and the elimination of difference." But what about when they do not become such a search, when, instead, they focus on finding more dependable understandings, context awareness, critical reflection on assumptions and validating contested meaning through discourse as in transformative learning? Postmodern critics often fail to recognize the difference. I have elsewhere noted,

Postmodernists who dichotomize local and more comprehensive ways of understanding learning ("totalizing narratives") must provide us with arguments and/or evidence that localized and situated learning alone can provide educators with more useful insight than those that include more broadly generalized learning experience...It is not enough to simply express an opinion about the presumed superior value of situated or of a primary, if not exclusive, focus on the deep structures of power that govern our lives. The test of a totalizing narrative or another belief or frame of reference is whether it works, yields better understanding than an alternative belief, whether opinions resulting are for the most part true or more often true than those to which alternative explanations would lead. (Mezirow, p. 66)

These same considerations pertain to the resistance of postmodern critics to the concept of ideals that presume to transcend local culture. For them, ideals become meta-narratives with an inherent Telos and are always suspect. We can all agree that learning is profoundly influenced by its specific context and may be analyzed as localized and situated. The question remains, however, whether the process of such learning may be best understood without recourse to

identifying commonalities in the learning process that contribute to its effectiveness and may indeed transcend a local culture.

Transformation Theory delineates the optimal conditions for effective discourse and suggests that these conditions also constitute optimal ("ideal") conditions of learning in any culture that wants to foster transformative learning. Are these optimal conditions for transformative learning to be interpreted as a "totalizing narrative" and rejected out of hand? Upon what evidence is such a judgment based? Are all findings that transcend a local culture to be considered valueless without assessing their worth? I suspect that in attempting to understand our lives we cannot do without meta-narratives but we need to become critically reflective of their assumptions and consequences.

Reason

It is reason that is considered to be the most natural, innate characteristic of 'man'. The road to autonomy and emancipation is traversed by living according to the dictates of reason. Autonomy, therefore, refers to a situation where, through reason, one obligates and controls oneself from a source inside or natural to oneself, from one's authentic self. More precisely, it is freedom from dependence because what supposedly prevents autonomy is dependence on anything that is external or other to oneself, that is, in effect, unnatural or 'other' to reason. (Usher and Edwards, p. 136)

Postmodern thought holds that there are many different rationalities. So does Transformation Theory. In particular, rationality refers to assessing reasons supporting one's options as objectively as possible and choosing the most effective means available to achieve one's objectives. In instrumental learning, rationality is judged by whether we are able to achieve technical success in meeting our objectives (*e.g.*, use methods that result in improved performance). In communicative learning, on the other hand, rationality is judged by our success in coming to an understanding concerning the issues at hand. The presenting and assessing of reasons that support conflicting beliefs is central to Transformation Theory. Reason is not an ideology, if this is understood as the ideas implicated in the very constitution of knowledge in society that hide or legitimate arbitrary power. Reason proceeds ideology; the very act of identifying an ideology as such implies critical reasoning. Critical reflection on the assumptions supporting these ideas emancipates because it dissolves the constraints implicit in unexamined beliefs often predicated upon ideology. Transformation Theory and postmodern thought agree that the rules that govern the terms and conditions of rationality and critical reflection are contested meanings and not exempt from critical reflection on their assumptions.

On the Self

Postmodern critics argue that the belief in a central, unified agency within each person is illusory. Many specialists in artificial intelligence and psychologists agree. Mark Tennant (1993) has defended Transformation Theory from charges that it implies a unitary self. More recently, Tennant (1998) questions the postmodernist notion of multiple selves and defends a concept of self he sees as more compatible with transformative learning. He notes that while postmodernists have challenged the concept of ideology critique that they believe implies

movement of a unitary self from a false to a true consciousness, this does not to apply to transformative learning as the movement is from a less to a more dependable way of knowing. Tennant argues that some level of continuity and coherence of the self, however contingent, is a necessary condition for resistance to domination and oppression. "In many of the sites in which adult educators work,' he observes, "the pursuit of a coherent, continuous self is indispensable to empowerment." He redefines a "situated" self, one that opens up the possibility of refusing the way he or she has been inscribed and of exploring alternative discourses about oneself as a means of resisting domination and oppression "In effect, we learn to read the text into which our self has been inscribed, and we discover that there are alternative readings and therefore and alternative self to be constructed." (1998, p. 373)

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