An Integrative Model for Transformative Learning

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Abstract: Transformative learning is a growing focus of study with input from many areas of adult education. This paper presents a model of transformative learning that integrates key scholarly contributions to transformative learning theory, providing a common framework and language for analyzing the transformative learning process.

Arguably the greatest challenge in the educational process is engaging learners in a way that is not merely informative but, in fact, transformative. Transformative learning, considered unique to adult education, is a process, as Taylor (1998) explains it, of getting beyond factual knowledge alone to become changed in some meaningful way by what one learns.

At once a universally acknowledged phenomenon and a uniquely personal experience, transformative learning is complex and elusive. The process can be climactic or cumulative, and is potentially affected by the nature of the learner, educational content, learning environment, and societal context. Furthermore, transformative learning theory has been developed from multiple perspectives. Mezirow's (1991) seminal work, for example, focuses on cognitive shifts in perspective, whereas Boyd (1991) offers an analytical psychology approach and Freire (1970) a sociopolitical view. Each perspective emphasizes different aspects of the transformative process, and together they yield an assortment of terminologies.

Such complex concepts can benefit from the presence of a unifying model. An integrated model can serve as a tool for analyzing the process and navigating its complexities and can provide a common language for discourse among educators. Although the literature is replete with discussions of the elements of the process, no cohesive model exists for transformative learning. This work proposes an integrative model of transformative learning based on the synthesis of decades of scholarly inquiry, supplemented by the author's 25 years of experience in adult education.

Description of the Model

The model is designed in three layers of detail. The macro level (Fig. 1) identifies three pivotal stages of the transformation process; the second level (Fig. 2) describes the processes learners engage in to arrive at those states; and the third, most detailed level (Fig. 3) iterates the steps embedded within each process.
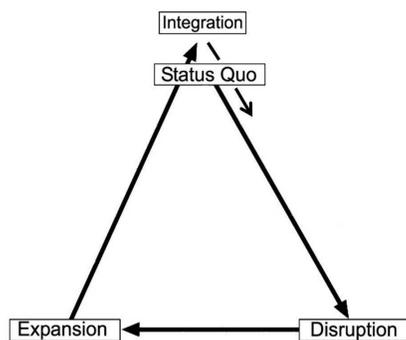

Fig. 1. Transformative Learning Model: Pivotal Stages

Transformation begins with the Status Quo, that is, the state of thinking, believing, or acting in which the learner enters the process. Through *disorientation,* the learner reaches a state of Disruption, in which the status quo has been challenged. *Analysis* moves the learner from Disruption to Expansion, in which the learner arrives at new, critically examined ways of being. From there, the learner engages in the *verification* process, deciding what is most consistent with his or her underlying beliefs and values, and taking action accordingly. Ultimately verification leads to Integration of the new way of being, a state that requires a *sustaining practice* to become the new status quo and basis for new learning.
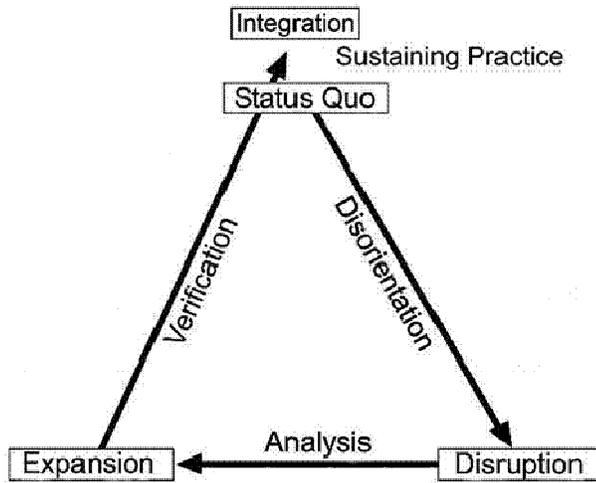
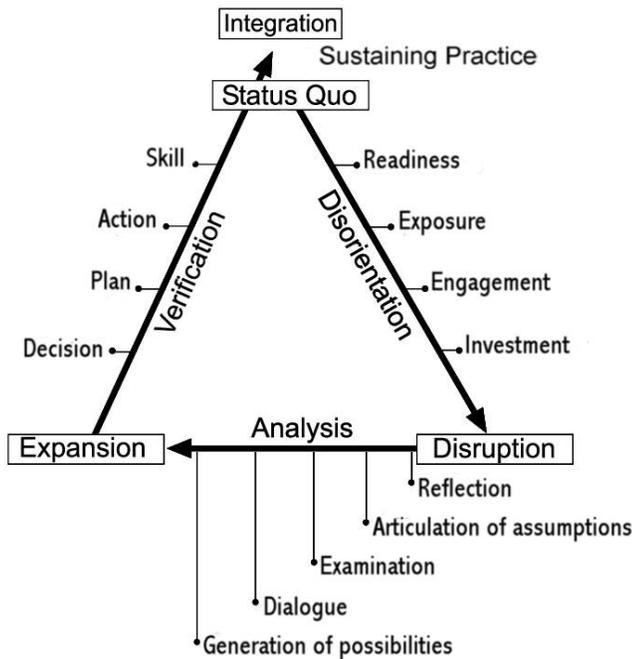Fig. 2. Transformative Learning Model: Pivotal Stages and Processes

Fig. 3 Transformative Learning Model: Pivotal Stages, Processes, and Embedded Elements

Relationship to Existing Literature

Several authors have suggested that the transformative learning process is cyclic, evolving, or developmental (Freire, 1970; Tennant, 1993; Taylor, 1998), a characteristic represented in the model's spiral design.

Status Quo to Disruption

Most aspects of this model are well established in the literature, beginning with the Status Quo or, in Mezirow's (1991) terms, the learner's frame of reference. Perhaps the most universally agreed upon component is the disruption of the initial state, whether it is Mezirow's "disorienting dilemma" (1991), Boyd's "personal dilemma" and recognition of the need to change (Boyd, 1991), or Scott's "disequilibrium" (1991). While a life crisis can prompt a person to move toward transformation (Mezirow, 1991), other less dramatic conflicts, including those created by teachers, can also promote transformation (Torosyan, 2007).

Openness to change, or readiness, is cited as a part of the transformational process by a number of authors including Mezirow (1991) and Boyd (1991). Lange (2004) describes learners' openness to transformative experience as revealed in their language, particularly in response to personal questions. Berger (2004) found that in interviews, students in transition between old and new ways of knowing had difficulty articulating ideas and thoughts coherently.

Disruption to Expansion

Analysis, by definition, is the breaking apart of something in order to better understand the nature of the whole. The analysis process incorporates Mezirow's (1991) and others' emphases on rational analysis (Freire 1970) and critical reflection (Mezirow 1991, 2000; Freire 1970), as well as Boyd's call for intuitive reflection and the search for transcendent truth (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Boyd 1991).

Throughout the literature, reflecting on the assumptions underlying previous ways of thinking and being and subjecting them to critical examination is central to the transformative process (Taylor, 2007). Recent research has demonstrated the value of different modes of reflection including journaling (King, 2004) and writing theses (Cohen, 2004). Grieving the loss of old ways of being in the world may also be a part of the reflective analysis process (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Scott, 1997).

Dialogue, or discourse, also plays an important role in the discovery of new ways of being (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Baumgartner, 2002; Taylor, 2007). Recent research is expanding our understanding of the possible nature of that dialogue (Taylor, 2007). Carter (2002), for example, found inner dialogue to play a significant role in women's transformative learning at work, and Eisen (2001) identified peer-learning partnerships as valuable.

The analysis process allows the learner to generate new possibilities. The very act of identifying underlying assumptions, generally unconscious by their nature, necessarily creates alternative viewpoints; to articulate that an assumption is one way of viewing the world implies that there are other ways. Analysis is the process that allows the learner to arrive at Expansion, this broader understanding of possibilities, reflecting Mezirow's (1991) characteristic of inclusivity and Boyd's (1991) expansion of consciousness.

Expansion to Integration

Critical analysis of assumptions and awareness of new ways of being is not sufficient to create transformation. Garvett (2004), studying a dialogic approach to teaching among higher education faculty, found that critical reflection and dialogue alone did not result in changes in performance. Verification describes the process that moves the learner more fully toward transformation. Verification incorporates several of the ten phases of transformation that

emerged from Mezirow's early research (1991), including planning a course of action, acquiring necessary knowledge and skills, and practicing behaviors to build competence and confidence. For Freire (1970), action is an essential component of the transformative process.

The final stage, Integration, or "reintegration" in Mezirow's (1991) terminology, is perhaps as well supported in the literature as the concept of Disruption. True transformation implies integrated changes, or as O'Sullivan (2003) describes it, "a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world" (p. 326).

What is less identified in the literature, however, is a mechanism to support and maintain the shift, a process identified in this model as a "sustaining practice". Transformative learning, as Freire (1970) envisioned it, is a never-ending process. The integration of new ways of thinking and being becomes the learner's new status quo from which new learning will take place.

Role of Relationships

A recent review of the literature (Taylor, 2007) indicates that more attention needs to be given to the importance of relationships in transformative learning. Indeed, in applying the integrative model of transformative learning to a variety of transformational experiences, the place of teachers, peers, dialogue partners, and social influences was perplexing. Perhaps the challenge lies in the inherent tension between Self and Other in the transformative learning process. Transformation is, by its nature, a personal and individual reality, and yet it occurs—is prompted, facilitated, and acted out—in the social context that is our existence.

Freire (1970) fiercely asserts that we are never independent of the social forces surrounding us. O'Sullivan (2003) claims that transformative learning shifts necessarily involve an understanding of ourselves in relationship with those around us. At the same time, Mezirow (2000) states that, "Transformation theory's focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others" (p. 8); and Imel (1998) states, "We must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others" (p. 1). While the two perspectives are not contradictory, they do hint at the complexity of the role others play in an individual's transformation.

Because the social element takes varying roles, particularly as support, and may be significant at nearly every step of the transformative process, relationship with others does not have a fixed place in the model as a stage, process, or even embedded element. Rather, it is viewed as an *effectuator*; it helps make transformation happen. In dialogue, a peer might function as an effectuator. In the disorientation process, a teacher might serve as an effectuator by modifying the intensity of the experience. Minimal disorientation is unlikely to encourage transformation, but disturbance that is too great may cause the learner to retreat swiftly back to the status quo. The effectuator might choose to intensify or mitigate the level of dissonance, taking a "Goldilocks approach", creating an environment in which the disruption is just right— "not too hard" and "not too soft."

Usefulness and Application

Analysis

Models provide a mechanism for stepping back from an intense, personal, or complex process and observing it. Having a cohesive and flexible model of transformative learning allows us to analyze the transformative process more objectively and systematically. Furthermore, laying the model as a template over the reality of experience helps to identify points of validation as well as areas for further study.

The integrative model of transformative learning may also be useful as a heuristic model in that it can prompt us to question the learning experience. Is the learner ready and open to transformation? How do we know? Can the learner's readiness be facilitated? While not prescriptive in nature, the model may serve as a tool for creating more predictably effective transformative experiences.

Common Language and Framework

Perhaps the most powerful advantage the model provides is a common framework for discussing the elusive phenomenon of transformation. Edward Taylor's (2007) recent review of the transformative learning literature confirms the growing interest in this area of inquiry, as well as the growing diversity of disciplines exploring the transformative learning process. Because transformations in worldviews often take place beyond the confines of a single classroom or event, with many agents contributing to the process, it is important to develop a common language for communication among players in the process and to create a model that transcends individual learning domains.

When investigations are driven by discipline-specific inquiry, we risk losing sight of the more universal questions that inform education. With a common language for discussing the transformative learning process, we can ask higher level questions and understand the answers more universally.

Limitations

In the development of any model, one must find a balance between simplicity and complexity. If a model is too simplistic and does not reflect the significant relationships among the constituent elements, it is useless. If, on the other hand, it describes the full complexity and intricacies of the concept, it becomes as overwhelming as the reality itself and so, again, becomes useless. It is the intention in the development of this model to find the balance of comprehensiveness and simplicity that allows the model to be applicable in multiple learning domains—cognitive, social, affective—while still providing sufficient detail to be of practical value in designing and examining educational experiences.

Although the steps of each process are placed along a line in the model, the transformative process is not necessarily linear in nature. Research and personal experience indicate that not all steps in the process are of equal importance or value in every transformative experience, nor do learners necessarily choose to take all opportunities to be transformed. In other words, while this model describes a critical path to transformation, it is not an ethnographic description of the lived experience of transformation.

Conclusion

The application of a model that appears to describe reality invariably leads to critiques that further illuminate our understanding of the educational process. This model, rather than resolving the uncertainties of transformative learning, provides a mechanism for analyzing transformative experiences and offers a common framework and language with which we can ask important and meaningful questions.

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