Chapter Six Transformational Learning

Geri, a mother of two, was a successful lawyer and master gardener. She expected to be named a partner at the law firm within the next year. At age thirty-seven, she was diagnosed with bone cancer. She researched treatment options and joined a support group. Before the diagnosis, Geri's priorities included buying a larger house in an upscale neighborhood, purchasing her "dream car," and spending time with her family on a vacation in Europe. After her diagnosis, Geri reflected on her priorities and she recognized that her relationships with family and friends were more important than material possessions.

Geri's story exemplifies transformative learning. *Transformative* or *transformational* (terms used interchangeably in the literature) learning is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live. Unlike informational learning, which refers to "extend[ing] already established cognitive capacities into new terrain" (**Kegan, 2000**, p. 48), transformational learning refers to "chang[ing] ... *what* we know" (p. 49; italics in original). The mental construction of experience, inner meaning, and reflection are common components of this approach.

This chapter examines transformational learning theory through seven lenses (**Taylor, 2005a**); we review three individualistic conceptualizations and four sociocultural perspectives on transformative learning. Next, three important concepts in transformational learning are discussed: experience, critical reflection, and development. Last, we highlight several unresolved issues in

transformational learning theory in addition to discussing recent trends in the transformative learning literature.

The Lenses of Transformational Learning

Lenses simultaneously allow us to see things and limit our view. It is the same with the lenses through which we see transformative learning. While not exhaustive, these lenses provide a reasonably holistic view of transformative learning. **Taylor (2005a)** provides seven lenses through which to view transformative learning. He divides them into two groups based on their "locus of learning" (**Taylor, 2005a**, p. 459). The first group comprises those perspectives whose locus of learning concerns the *individual*—namely, the psychocritical, psychodevelopmental, and psychoanalytic perspectives. The second group is composed of approaches where the focus of learning is *sociocultural*, including the social-emancipatory, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, and planetary approaches.

The lenses that focus on the individual are represented by the works of Jack Mezirow, Laurent Daloz, and Robert Boyd. Mezirow's psychocritical perspective is a fully developed theory of adult learning that has generated a plethora of articles, books, and dissertations. Less well known are Daloz's psychodevelopmental approach and Boyd's psychoanalytic perspective. Daloz focuses on the intuitive nature of transformative learning, which champions the importance of stories in the process. Boyd's psychoanalytic approach explains the importance of symbols and the unconscious in the transformative learning process.

The best-known sociocultural approach is Freire's social- emancipatory view of transformative learning. Freire's orientation emerges from a context of poverty and oppression and focuses on radical social change. The three other sociocultural perspectives represent relatively recent developments in the transformative learning literature. Tisdell delineates the cultural-spiritual view of transformative learning. This approach emphasizes the connection between individuals' various socially constructed positionalities (race, class, gender) and their knowledge construction through story-telling. This perspective emphasizes fostering cultural and spiritual awareness (**Taylor, 2005a**). The race-centric view concentrates on

the experiences of individuals of African descent within the "sociocultural, political, and historical context" in which they find themselves (**Sheared, 1994**, p. 36). Transformative learning is seen as a daily, conscious strategy in this view (**Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006**). Last, the planetary view, detailed by O'Sullivan, examines the "interconnectedness between the universe, planet, natural environment, human community, and the personal world" (**Taylor, 2005a**, p. 462).

Mezirow's Psychocritical Approach

Based on interviews with women who returned to college after an extended hiatus, Mezirow's theory, introduced in 1978, has invited philosophical critique and a burgeoning of empirical research since the 1990s. The first national conference on transformative learning was held at Teachers College, Columbia University, in April 1998 (Wiessner & **Mezirow, 2000**). It continues to be a biannual, much anticipated event where transformative learning in general and Mezirow's theory in particular are discussed. In 2005, approximately eighty-five papers were presented at the conference.

Mezirow's theory concerns how adults make sense of their life experience. Mezirow defines learning as "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (2000, p. 5). He differentiates between types of meaning structures, including frame of reference, habits of mind, and points of view. Mezirow indicates that a "*frame of reference* is a 'meaning perspective,' the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions. It involves cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. ... It provides the context for making meaning within which we choose what and how a sensory experience is to be constructed and/or appropriated" (p. 16; italics in original).

There are two dimensions to our frame of reference: a habit of mind, and a point of view (**Mezirow, 2000**). A habit of mind is "a set of assumptions—broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience" (p. 17). There are several varieties of habit of mind, including moral/ethical, philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic generalized predispositions. For example, a habit of mind may be ethnocentrism—the belief that one's group is superior to others (**Mezirow, 1997a**).

A point of view is made up of *meaning schemes,* which are "sets of immediate, specific beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and value judgments" (**Mezirow, 2000**, p. 18). A resulting point of view of ethnocentricism may be the specific beliefs one has regarding particular groups of people outside one's own group (**Mezirow, 1997a**). Points of view change more easily than habits of mind because we receive feedback on points of view and are more aware of them than we are of habits of mind (**Mezirow, 1997a**).

Transformative learning occurs when there is a transformation in one of our beliefs or attitudes (a meaning scheme), or a transformation of our entire perspective (habit of mind) (**Mezirow, 2000**). Transformative learning, says Mezirow, is "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning schemes, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (2000, p. 8). Through transformative learning we are freed from uncritical acceptance of others' purposes, values, and beliefs. Transformations in our habits of mind may be sudden and dramatic (epochal) or they may be slower, incremental changes in our points of view (meaning schemes), which eventually lead to a change in our habits of mind (meaning perspective) (**Mezirow, 2000**). For example, two of Andy's friends have revealed that they are gay over the past several years. As a result, Andy begins to question his homophobic reaction to gays and lesbians. Over time, Andy changes his point of view (meaning scheme) about gays and lesbians and is no longer homophobic (change in meaning perspective).

Mezirow recognizes that not all learning is transformative. He states, "We can learn simply by adding knowledge to our meaning schemes or learning new meaning schemes ... and it can be a crucially important experience for the learner" (1991, p. 223). For example, in a study that examined the stability of the perspective transformation in HIV-positive adults over time, the authors noted that the perspective transformation (new worldview) had not only held over time but people continued to make new meaning schemes, such as the "adoption of a future-oriented perspective" (**Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, & Baumgartner, 2000**, p. 110). A subsequent study with the same participants almost two years later noted additional changes in meaning schemes, including a more tolerant, forgiving attitude toward others (**Baumgartner, 2002**).

Mezirow's transformative learning theory is made up of ten steps or phases. However, there are four main components of the transformative learning process: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action. (A more in-depth discussion of experience and critical reflection appears later in the chapter.) The process begins with the learners' experiences. However, just *having* the experience is not enough. The learner must critically self-examine the assumptions and beliefs that have structured how the experience has been interpreted. This sets in motion a revision of "specific assumptions about oneself and others until the very structure of assumptions becomes transformed" (**Mezirow, 1981**, p. 8).

The new meaning created by a perspective transformation is highly subjective and changeable. To test whether our new meanings are true or authentic (**Mezirow, 1995**), and to arrive at the best possible judgment, we seek out a variety of opinions, including ones that challenge the status quo, and we engage in the Habermasian concept of "discourse" (**Mezirow, 2000**, p. 10). Discourse is "dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief" (**Mezirow, 2000**, pp. 10–11). People weigh evidence for and against the argument and critically assess assumptions. Clearer understanding is achieved through talking with others.

Drawing from Habermas, there are "ideal" conditions for discourse: having complete information, being free from self-deception, being able to evaluate arguments objectively, having empathy, having an "equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse," and so on (**Mezirow, 2000**, p. 13). Mezirow is aware that these are *ideal* conditions; nevertheless, fostering this discourse is "a long established priority of adult educators" (p. 14).

Mezirow clearly states: "Discourse is not a war or a debate; it is a conscientious effort to find agreement, to build a new understanding" (1996, p. 170). Adult educators must be aware that helping adults learn how to move from an argumentative mindset to an empathic understanding of others' views is a priority (**Mezirow, 2000**).

Discourse can occur in one-to-one relationships, in groups, and in formal educational settings. Several publications have focused on applications, experiences, and suggestions for educators interested in facilitating this type of learning in educational settings

(Cranton, **1996, 2002**; **Lee & Greene, 2003**; **Sawyer, 2004**; **Yorks & Sharoff, 2001**).

Action is the final component of the transformative learning process. The person may take "immediate action, delayed action or reasoned reaffirmation of an existing pattern of action" (**Mezirow, 2000**, p. 24). Action can range from making a decision about something to engaging in radical political protest. For critics, who see the goal of adult education as social action, Mezirow's theory, with its emphasis on individual transformation, is too egocentric (**Taylor, 1997a**). However, Mezirow speaks to social action in certain circumstances: "When the disorienting dilemma is the result of oppressive action, the person needs to take individual or collective action against the oppressor" (**Mezirow, 1997b**, p. 60). Mezirow continues, "Personal transformation leads to alliances with others of like mind to work toward effecting necessary changes in relationships, organizations, and systems, each of which requires a different mode of praxis" (1992, p. 252). A three-step process for social action begins with becoming aware of a need to change (**Mezirow, 1993**). This need arises through critically reflecting on assumptions and biases. Next, "a feeling of solidarity with others committed to change" (p. 189) needs to be established. And finally, one has to learn what actions are appropriate in particular situations to implement change.

To illustrate this three-step process, let us take the case of Karen, who returns to college as an adult. She has always had trouble in math courses and had assumed she was not academically inclined. Nevertheless, she decides to try again to get her college degree. Once again, she encounters problems and she considers withdrawing. However, she has done exceptionally well in other courses, and one of her instructors suggests she be tested for a learning disability. This suggestion causes her to question assumptions about her academic ability, and when a learning disability is confirmed, Karen seeks accommodations that allow her to stay in school. In the process, her image of herself changes. She locates others with learning disabilities, and they form a support and advocacy group. The group works toward raising awareness and changing attitudes on campus regarding learning disabilities.

According to Mezirow, the process is most often set in motion by a disorienting dilemma, that is, a particular life event or life experience such as the death of a loved one or an illness that a person

experiences as a crisis. This crisis cannot be resolved through the application of previous problem-solving strategies. In the preceding example, Karen's diagnosis of a learning disability may be her "disorienting dilemma." The disorienting dilemma is the first step in the ten-phase or ten-step process. (See **Mezirow, 1991**, for a delineation of all ten steps.) Next, the learner engages in self-examination, which is often accompanied by "feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame" (**Mezirow, 2000**, p. 22). Initially, Karen may feel shame or anger at being learning-disabled. Self-examination is included in the third step of a critical assessment of assumptions. After the initial shock of the diagnosis, Karen starts to recognize that the diagnosis of a learning disability means she can begin to think more positively about her academic abilities. After all, she is not "dumb" or "incompetent"; she just has a weakness in one area. This assessment leads to the fourth phase of recognizing that others have gone through a similar process. When Karen seeks accommodations for her disability and joins a support group, she recognizes that she is not alone. Step 5 consists of exploring options for forming new roles, relationships, or actions, which leads to formulating a plan of action. This plan has four steps: acquiring knowledge and skills, trying out new roles, renegotiating relationships, and building competence and self- confidence in the new roles and relationships. In our example, Karen may try being an advocate for people with disabilities. She gains skills and builds confidence as a spokesperson for people with disabilities in her effort to raise awareness and change people's attitudes toward people with disabilities. The final step or phase of the process is a reintegration back into one's life based on the new, transformed perspective (**Mezirow, 2000**). Mezirow (1995, p. 50) comments that although "a perspective transformation appears to follow" the process of creating meaning, it is not necessarily "in this exact sequence."

Empirical studies of transformative learning reviewed by Taylor, although generally supportive of this process, have added depth to the recursive and evolving nature of the transformative learning process (for example, **Taylor, 1994**; Saavedra, 1995, as cited in **Taylor, 2000a**). Several studies also revealed a number of other factors inherent in the transformative learning process. For example, **Erickson (2002)** reasoned that individuals' *level* of meaning-making may influence how they experience the transformative

learning process. Erickson used Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, and Felix's (1988) subject-object interview to determine participants' current level or order of meaning-making (as cited in **Erickson, 2002**). Next, Erickson analyzed the interview for Mezirow's ten-phase process of perspective transformation. Participants' meaning- making capacity influenced their experience of the perspective transformation. For example, those at more advanced orders of meaning-making "seemed more purposeful and less accidental" in their exploration of new roles, relationships, and actions (Mezirow's Phase 5) than participants at a lower order (**Erickson, 2002**, p. 105). Likewise, **Merriam (2004)** argued that "mature cognitive development is foundational to engaging in critical reflection and rational discourse necessary for transformational learning" (p. 65). Yet, she noted that two studies confirmed that people "had transformed their perspective without being aware of the change process" (p. 66). Merriam concluded that Mezirow should "expand the theory of transformational learning to include more ... affective and intuitive dimensions on an equal footing with cognitive and rational components" (pp. 66–67).

In sum, Mezirow's psychocritical approach to transformative learning has produced a plethora of scholarship and research. His recursive ten-step, or ten-phase, model contains four main components: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action. In short, the learner must critically reflect on his or her experience, talk with others about his or her new worldview in order to gain the best judgment, and *act* on the new perspective. Recent research adds depth to a theory long criticized for its overreliance on rationality. Studies indicate that one's cognitive development may influence his or her ability to experience a perspective transformation (**Merriam, 2004**) or experience of the perspective transformation process (**Erickson, 2002**).

Daloz's Psychodevelopmental Perspective and Boyd's Psychoanalytic Approach

Perhaps less well known, but equally important, Daloz's psycho-developmental perspective and Boyd's psychoanalytic approach to transformative learning augment Mezirow's ideas. While Mezirow sees transformation as a more rational endeavor and emphasizes

critical reflection, Daloz and Boyd view transformative learning as more holistic and intuitive (**Dirkx, 1998**).

A teacher and administrator, Daloz focuses on adults who are returning to higher education. In his view, the goal of transformative learning is lifelong personal development, with the teacher serving as a mentor in the transformative learning process (**Taylor, 2005a**). Like Mezirow, Daloz recognizes that people need to make meaning of their experiences and that individuals are often in a developmental transition when they seek higher education to "help them make sense of lives whose fabric of meaning has gone frayed" (**Daloz, 1999**, p. 4). Education is a "transformational journey" (**Daloz, 1986**, p. 16) that should "promote development." (Further discussion of adult development as it relates to transformative learning appears later in the chapter.)

The mentor serves as guide, cheerleader, challenger, and supporter during the learning process. The teacher/mentor challenges students to examine their conceptions of self and the world and to formulate new, more developed perspectives. Like Mezirow, for Daloz dialogue/discourse is integral to the process of transformation. However, unlike Mezirow, Daloz concentrates on the importance of stories on the journey toward an expanded worldview. He notes, "The first business of a guide is to listen to the dreams of the pilgrim. How are our students moving? What do they want for themselves? How do they tell their own stories?" (**Daloz, 1986**, p. 21). Next, the mentor can *tell* the student stories in an effort to promote development. It is through this mutual storying of lives that development can occur. Stories also assist mentors in doing three things for students: providing support, challenging students, and providing a vision (**Daloz, 1999**).

Daloz (1999, p. 43) offers three "maps" of adult development but he does not prescribe an end point to this transformational journey. The first map consists of phase theories of adult development such as presented by Daniel Levinson in *Seasons of a Man's Life* (**Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978**) and *Seasons of a Woman's Life* (**Levinson & Levinson, 1996**). This family of theories examines "common tasks that people confront as they face the problems associated with aging" (**Daloz, 1986**, p. 47). These tasks can be culturally determined and may vary depending

on a variety of sociocultural factors including gender, class, and ethnicity. Stage theories, the second map, such as Kegan's *The Evolving Self* (1982), examines cognitive growth and the ability to think outside of one's cultural reference. The third map, Perry's model of intellectual and ethical development (1970, 1999) helps us look at how we and our students make "the journey from naïve and simplistic thinking to complex and relativistic reasoning" over time (**Daloz, 1986**, p. 48).

To summarize, Daloz takes a storied approach to development and transformative learning. Through storytelling, Daloz and his students journey toward a more holistic and transformed worldview. Like Mezirow and Freire, Daloz recognizes the importance of cognitive growth. He acknowledges the importance of the whole person in that growth.

Boyd's psychoanalytic approach to transformative learning (Boyd, **1989**, **1991**; **Boyd & Myers, 1988**) predates the recent flurry of attention given to spirituality in adult education (**Fenwick & English, 2004**; **Kovan & Dirkx, 2003**; **Tisdell, 2003**). His work, grounded in depth psychology, sees transformation as an inner journey of individuation from parts of the psyche such as the ego and the collective unconscious (**Boyd, 1991**). He defines transformation as "a fundamental change in one's personality involving conjointly the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration" (1991, p. 459). By coming to terms with one's inner psychic conflicts, one can achieve self-actualization. To integrate the emotional and spiritual parts of learning into ourselves, we must make sense of the symbols and images in our psyche. Only then can we understand how the unconscious influences our daily lives (**Dirkx, 1998**).

Like Mezirow and Daloz, Boyd indicates that dialogue is important to the transformative learning process. Dirkx states (1998), "The goal of transformative learning is to identify these images ... and to establish an intrapersonal dialogue with them" (p. 7). The dialogue occurs between the ego and other "unconscious structures that populate the psyche, such as the Shadow, Anima, and Animus" (p. 7). Through dialogue we can individuate and become less subject to "compulsions, obsessions, and complexes," which may be the more unconscious manifestation of the individuation process (p. 7).

Freire's Social-Emancipatory Philosophy

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's philosophy of transformative learning is the best-known sociocultural approach to transformative learning. His perspective emerged from his literacy work with rural Brazilian farmers in the mid-twentieth century (**McLaren, 2000**). Unlike Mezirow's theory, which is based on the experiences of White, middle-class women and concentrates primarily on personal transformation, Freire's theory emerges from the context of poverty, illiteracy, and oppression and is set in a larger framework of radical social change. In Freire's approach, personal empowerment and social transformation are inseparable processes. His conceptions of conscientization and empowerment have contributed significantly to the underlying theoretical framework of transformational learning.

Freire differentiates between two kinds of education: banking and problem posing. *Banking education* is teacher-centered as the "all-knowing" teacher deposits knowledge into the passive students who serve as receptacles for this knowledge (**Freire, 2000**). The teacher decides the content of the course and is the authority in the classroom. Banking education resists dialogue. Students are oppressed and live in a "culture of silence" because their respective worlds are defined by the teacher (oppressor) (**Freire, 1985**, p. 72). Banking education serves the oppressors because it domesticates the oppressed. In contrast, the purpose of *problem-posing education* is liberation. Central to the learning is a changed relationship between teacher and student. They are coinvestigators into their common reality, the sociocultural situation in which they live (**Freire, 2000**). Further, dialogue is considered "indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality" (p. 64).

The process of conscientization, which is an ongoing process where the learner becomes increasingly aware of the various oppressive forces in his or her life and eventually becomes part of the process of social change (**Heany, 2005**), begins with dialogue. Through dialogue, generative themes or concerns are posed by the learners themselves and become the content of a learning situation. For example, in asking learners for some words that capture their everyday experience, the word for "slum" or "land" or "taxes" or "illness" or "government" might come up. These words

are then broken down into syllables and used in various contexts in learning how to read. At the same time, participants engage in discussions about these concepts. These discussions raise their awareness about their life situations (**Freire, 2000**).

Conscientization occurs at several levels. At the least-aware levels is a magical, fatalistic consciousness in which nothing about one's world is questioned; external forces are in charge, and there is nothing that can be done to change things as they are. Midway between being totally unaware and critical consciousness, people begin to sense that they may have some control over their lives and turn to questioning things as they are. The most sophisticated stage of consciousness is critical consciousness. Here one achieves an in-depth understanding of the forces that shape one's life space, and becomes an active agent in constructing a different, more just reality.

The ultimate goal of education is liberation, or praxis, "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (**Freire, 2000**, p. 60). Note that a key component of Freire's philosophy, like Mezirow's, is critical reflection. Critical reflection occurs through problem posing and dialogue with other learners.

Freire has operationalized his theory of education with techniques that have demonstrated success in combating illiteracy in numerous countries, including Chile, Switzerland, Tanzania, Australia, and Italy (**McLaren, 2000**). Its application in North America has been limited, owing perhaps to the necessary corollary of social change. Although conscientization is always a political act in Freire's theory, it can be seen as similar to perspective transformation in its characterization of adult learning as the process of becoming aware of one's assumptions, beliefs, and values and then transforming those assumptions into a new perspective or level of consciousness (**Mezirow, 1995**).

Emerging Sociocultural Perspectives: The Cultural-Spiritual, Race-Centric, and Planetary Approaches

Tisdell (2003) discusses the main concepts of the cultural-spiritual approach. Tisdell posits that "spirituality ... is fundamentally about how we make meaning in our lives" through conscious and

unconscious processes such as dreams and symbols (p. 31). In this way, Tisdell's perspective seems similar to **Boyd's (1989)** conceptualization. However, Tisdell also includes the role of culture in the transformative learning experience. This approach examines how learners, in various cultural contexts and with different positionalities (for example, race, class, gender, sexual orientation), "construct knowledge as a part of the transformative learning experience" (**Taylor, 2005a**, p. 461). Whole-person learning, including personal, political, historical, and sacred learning, is emphasized. In this view, the teacher serves as a collaborator and helps the learners share and revise their narratives as new meaning is made.

Tisdell (2003) names several factors that foster spiritual-cultural transformative learning. First, cross-cultural relationships allow us to be exposed to different ways of thinking and being in the world. Second, educators need to be spiritually and culturally grounded in order to promote authenticity in students. When we are authentic and open to experiences, transformation can occur. Third, transformative learning may occur more easily in community-based, culturally relevant settings because community-based educators feel "freer to use different modalities to provide a different kind of experience for people or simply to go with how communities draw on the spirituality that is part of their lifeblood" (p. 195). Last, the environment needs to allow for explorations on the cognitive, affective, relational, and symbolic levels.

The race-centric approach to transformative learning is a "culturally bounded, oppositional, and non-individualistic conception of transformative learning" that puts people of African descent at the center (**Taylor, 2005a**, p. 461). It is culturally bounded in that it emerges from the experiences of people of African descent. **Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006)** explain that this perspective is "grounded in oppositional spirit" because Blacks (and other minority cultures) live in opposition to the cultural norm. The race-centric perspective focuses on the transformative learning of the group in an effort to raise race consciousness.

Central to this view is **Sheared's (1994)** conception of poly-rhythmic realities or attention to African descendents' "lived experience within a sociocultural, political, and historical context" (p. 36). Johnson-Bailey (**Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006**) recalls an experience where these polyrhythmic realities intersected. At

age five, in the segregated southern United States of the 1950s, Johnson-Bailey was told she could no longer play with her best friend—a White girl named Dianne. Johnson-Bailey writes, "This lesson on race, on difference, on power, would become more sophisticated and theoretical over my life span. ... [I]t was the first ... that would transform my way of thinking ... my way of existing" (p. 50). Johnson-Bailey notes that because of racism and sexism, Black women's conceptions of themselves and the world in which they live are transformed. She continues, "Most of my Black women colleagues see transformational learning as the only medium in which we exist, learn, and teach. Since it is the air we breathe, maybe [we] just take it for granted and don't attend to or claim it sufficiently" (p. 51).

In order to foster transformative learning, this perspective promotes inclusion of voices traditionally silenced and a sense of belonging as a member of the group (**Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006**). The race-centric approach understands the importance of intra- and intercultural negotiation in the transformative learning process. Finally, similar to other transformative learning approaches, people deconstruct their assumptions through dialogue with others.

Last, the planetary view of transformative learning "recognizes the interconnectedness between the universe, planet, natural environment, human community and the personal world" (**Taylor, 2005a**, p. 462). The goal of this perspective is planetary consciousness. It emphasizes "quality of life issues, fostering a community's sense of place, diversity within and between communities, and an appreciation of spirituality" (p. 462). Its uniqueness amongst the perspectives is in its attention to how people relate to the physical world.

For **O'Sullivan (2002)**, visionary transformative education includes several elements. First, people must move beyond the limited vision of a global market economy and locate their lives "in a larger cosmological context much more breathtaking than the market vision of our world" (p. 7). Second, we must adopt a definition of development that "links the creative evolutionary processes of the universe, the planet, the earth community, the human community, and the personal world" (p. 8). Third, we need to understand how our quality of life goes beyond our standard of living to include our need for community and the necessity

of diversity within and between communities. Last, transformative education must address spirituality.

In sum, all perspectives possess commonalities. All theorists are constructivists. That is, they view knowledge as constructed by the learner rather than "out there" to be discovered (**Dirkx, 1998**). Second, dialogue is necessary for transformative learning to occur. Dialogue with others, or intrapsychically in Boyd's case, assists the learner in expanding her views. Third, critical reflection on the origin and nature of our submerged assumptions, biases, beliefs, and values, and in Boyd's case, symbols, is also necessary for change and growth to occur. Fourth, most theorists mention social change as a result of transformative learning (**Daloz, 2000**; **Freire, 2000**; **Mezirow, 2000**; **O'Sullivan, 1999**).

Key Concepts in Transformational Learning

Three key concepts of transformative learning emerge: life experience, the nature of critical reflection, and the connection between transformative learning and development. We draw from several sources to discuss these three areas.

Experience

Experience is integral to learning. One of the assumptions of andra- gogy is that adults bring with them a depth and breadth of experience that can be used as a resource for their and others' learning (**Knowles, 1980**). These experiences come in different *dimensions.* For example, a "direct embodied experience" is "an immediate encounter in the here-and-now, planned or unplanned, involving us physically, emotionally, sensually, mentally, and perhaps spiritually" (**Fenwick, 2003**, p. 13). Other dimensions of experience include vicarious experiences, simulated experiences, collaborative experiences, and introspective experiences such as meditation.

However experience is construed, the ways in which it can be used in learning differs according to one's theoretical orientation. **Tennant (1991)** delineates several uses: "First, ... teachers can link their explanations and illustrations to the prior experiences of learners. ... Second, teachers can attempt to link learning

activities to learners' current experiences at work, home, or in the community" (pp. 196–197). Third, teachers can create activities such as simulations, games, and role-plays. These activities can lead to learners' critical reflection of assumptions.

Clearly, Tennant's third level is most congruent with the use of experience in transformative learning. Equally obvious is that not all experiences trigger learning—whether the learning is a simple addition to our prior knowledge or a fundamental change in our perspective. Further, the identical experience—a job change or a divorce, for example—can trigger learning for some people but not others. Adults may be unable to respond to a new experience. It is "at this point of disjuncture" that "individuals are forced to ask why this has occurred to them or what it means. These questions are located at the start and at the core of human learning" (**Jarvis, 1992**, p. 15).

Critical Reflection

With an experience that one cannot accommodate into the prior life structure, the transformative learning process can begin. Necessary to the process is critical reflection, the second key concept. As Criticos (1993, p. 162) points out, "Effective learning does not follow from a positive experience but from effective reflection." Reflection is a cognitive process. We can think about our experience—muse, review, and so on—but to reflect critically, we must also examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions that affect how we make sense of the experience.

Mezirow (2000) differentiates among three types of reflection, only one of which can lead to transformative learning. *Content reflection*, the first type, is thinking about the actual experience itself. *Process reflection* is thinking about ways to deal with the experience—that is, problem-solving strategies. *Premise reflection* involves examining long-held, socially constructed assumptions, beliefs, and values about the experience or problem.

Much has been written about critical reflection, especially under the more common topic of critical thinking and reflective practice (see **Chapter Seven**). There are a number of adult educators in addition to Mezirow who have focused on critical thinking, especially as it relates to transformative learning. For example, **Cranton's (2002)**

scholarship concerns fostering transformative learning in the classroom. In order to engage learners in self-reflection, Cranton suggests using reflective journals in which students reflect on various incidents in their lives to foster the critical reflection that promotes transformative learning.

The most prominent adult educator writing about critical thinking is Brookfield (1987, 1994). He presents a rationale as to why critical thinking is important and how adults can become critical thinkers in their family, work, and personal lives and in relation to mass media. Especially relevant to the link between critical thinking or critical reflection and transformative learning is his model of critical thinking.

The model consists of five phases very similar to Mezirow's conceptualization. First is what he calls a trigger event, "some unexpected happening [that] prompts a sense of inner discomfort and perplexity" (**Brookfield, 1987**, p. 25). The next stage, appraisal, captures several of the steps in Mezirow's process, including a self-examination of the situation, "brooding" about our discomfort, and finding others who are experiencing a similar problem. In the third phase of exploration, we examine new and different ways of explaining or accommodating the experience that has led to our discomfort. The fourth phase is one of developing alternative perspectives. Basically, we try on a new role, a new way of behaving, a new way of thinking about the problem or experience, and simultaneously gain confidence in the new perspective. Finally, we are able to integrate these new ways of thinking or living "into the fabric of our lives" (p. 27).

In subsequent writing (1996, 2000, 2005a), Brookfield has clarified and expanded his notion of critical thinking. He now believes that critical thinking helps us scrutinize (2000, p. 136) "how we view power relationships in our lives" and helps us analyze "hegemonic assumptions" (**Brookfield, 2000**, p. 138). Hegemonic, or taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, serve the status quo and keep others disenfranchised. An example of a hegemonic assumption is the idea that "adult education is a vocation requiring self-abasement of practitioners on behalf of learners" (**Brookfield, 2000**, p. 138). If adult educators believe this assumption, administrators can "guilt" them into taking on more work and reducing costs. In this view, critical reflection is employed to examine social

inequities. Brookfield acknowledges that his definition of critical reflection is a stricter and more radically political definition than Mezirow's because Mezirow "allows for the possibility of implicit critical reflection 'as when we mindlessly choose between good and evil because of our assimilated values'" (**Mezirow, 1998**, p. 186, as cited in **Brookfield, 2000**, p. 131).

Development

In addition to the centrality of experience and critical reflection, there is in transformational learning theory the notion of individual development. Individual development is both inherent in and an outcome of the process. The ability to think critically, which is mandatory to effecting a transformation, is itself developmental; that is, we can become better, more critical thinkers. Elias (1997, pp. 3–4) explains how individual and cognitive development are intertwined:

What are transformed through the processes of transformative learning are several capacities of mind or consciousness. First is the development of a "conscious I" capable of exercising critical reflection. Second is a transformed capacity for thinking, transformed to be more dialectical or systemic, thinking (for example) that perceives polarities as mutually creative resources rather than as exclusive and competitive options and that perceives archetypes as partners for inner dialogue. Third is the capacity to be a conscious creative force in the world, as expressed, for example, as the capacity to intervene in and transform the quality of discourse in a group or learning community.

Mezirow (1995) acknowledges that other scholars make important contributions to understanding adult critical reflection. King and Kitchener's (1994, 2002) model, which draws on the earlier work of **Perry (1970)**, consists of seven stages, of which only the last two are characteristic of critical reflection (see **Chapter Thirteen** for a further explanation of this model).

Development is also the outcome of transformative learning. Mezirow (1991, p. 155) states clearly that the process of perspective transformation is "the central process of adult development."

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And "meaning perspectives that permit us to deal with a broader range of experience, to be more discriminating, to be more open to other perspectives, and to better integrate our experiences are superior perspectives" (1990b, p. 14).

K. **Taylor (2000)** discusses changing *how* one knows in developmental terms. She explores movement along five dimensions. First, learners move "toward knowing as a dialogical process" (p. 160). They learn how they construct knowledge and they reconstruct knowledge in light of new experiences and reflections. Second, learners move "toward a dialogical relationship with oneself" by learning who they are and that they can choose to be another way (p. 163). Third, individuals move "toward being continuous learners" (p. 163). They become aware that learning is up to them. Next, they move "toward self-agency and authorship," where they "increasingly recognize their responsibility for their actions, choices, and values and for the decisions they may make based on those values" (p. 163). Finally, they move "toward connections with others," where they learn in community but retain their individuality (p. 163).

That the outcome of transformational learning is development is congruent with the growth orientation of much of adult learning literature generally. Underpinning this orientation is humanist psychology. Rogers (1961, p. 115) contended that "significant learning" results in a more mature self who is open to experience, to "new people, new situations, new problems." **Knowles's (1980)** model of andragogy is written quite explicitly from this humanistic perspective, defining adult learning as "a process that is used by adults for their self-development" (p. 25) and "to mature" (p. 28). Similarly, Kegan (1994, p. 287) wrote that higher and adult education's "mission" is to "assist adults in creating the order of consciousness the modern world demands."

This fact raises yet another dimension to the link between transformation and development. **Tennant (2000)** argues that what constitutes psychological development is itself a social construction; that is, in any society at any particular point in time, there are normative expectations about "what it means to be enlightened or developmentally more mature" (**Tennant, 1993**, p. 41). He warns that changes that are part of the expected life course (instances of normative development) should not be confused with actual changes in perspective.

Although there are certainly other factors important to transformational learning, we have discussed three that are central to the process. First, transformative learning posits experience as its starting point and as its content for reflection. Engaging the life experience in a critically reflective manner is a necessary condition for transformation. Finally, the entire process is about change—change that is growth-enhancing and developmental.

Unresolved Issues in Transformational Learning Theory

The growing prominence of transformative learning theory has generated closer scrutiny of several aspects of the theory. Mezirow's psychocritical perspective has been critiqued for its inattention to context and its overreliance on rationality in the meaning-making process. In addition, scholars have examined the role of relationships in transformative learning, the place of social action, and the educator's role in fostering transformative learning.

Context

Clark and Wilson (1991) were the first to point out that Mezirow's theory appeared to be acontextual. Derived as it was from research on women returning to school, they note that the women's experiences "were studied as if they stood apart from their historical and sociocultural context, thereby limiting our understanding of the full meaning of those experiences" (p. 78). Further, they contended, Mezirow's own orientation toward autonomy uncritically reflects the values of the dominant culture in our society—masculine, White, and middle-class. In addition, **Taylor's (2000a)** review of the empirical research on Mezirow's theory revealed a number of studies that found that aspects of the individual's biographical history and sociocultural factors shaped the nature of the transformative learning. Taylor points out that more attention to such factors can help explain, for example, why a disorienting dilemma might lead to a perspective transformation for one person but not another. Indeed, studies accounting for individual biography and context are beginning to give a richer picture of transformative learning. Recent studies have explored transformative learning in the urban context (**Kappel & Daley, 2004**), in an experiential Hawaiian ecological

course that emphasized indigenous knowledge (**Feinstein, 2004**), and in corporate America (**Henderson, 2002**). All have indicated that the context affects the transformative learning process.

Power, an interrelated aspect of context, has not been adequately addressed in Mezirow's theory. McDonald, Cervero, and Courtenay (1999) examined the role of power in ethical vegans' transformative learning process. The authors acknowledged that while vegans experienced a perspective transformation when they journeyed from being meat eaters to vegans, "the sustained power of the normative ideology ... brought subtle changes in the vegans' praxis over time" (p. 19). They remained vegans but were worn down by "social-cultural and interpersonal challenges to veganism," and "their praxis became less outspoken" (p. 19). Likewise, in a longitudinal study of international service program participants in Nicaragua, participants indicated that upon returning to the United States, respondents had a "chameleon complex" where they held unpopular views on global issues but felt "compelled to conform and blend in with mainstream views on local and global issues even though they disagree[d]" (**Kiely, 2003**, p. 221).

Mezirow (1996, 2000) has attempted to explain better how context fits into his theory. He acknowledges, "The justification for much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends on the context—biographical, historical, cultural—in which they are embedded" (**Mezirow, 2000**, p. 3). He maintains that certain sociocultural factors such as racism, sexism, and classism may impede or encourage critical reflection and reflective discourse. "Transformation Theory," Mezirow (1996, p. 169) writes, "does not suggest a disengaged image of the individual learner, but of a learning process characterized by dialogical voices. The social dimension is central, but so are the historical and cultural dimensions of the process."

Rationality and Affect

The second major issue with Mezirow's view of transformational learning theory is what appears to be an overreliance on rationality as the means of effecting a perspective transformation; other forms of knowing are secondary at best. Rational thinking is a particularly Western concept, a product of the Enlightenment and

Descartes' mind-body split. The idea that emotions and cognition are separate and that emotions are "less evolved" continues to this day despite evidence to the contrary (**Taylor, 2001**). Even in the West, rationality, and in particular its separation from experience, is also gender-specific, privileging men, those of the middle and upper classes, and Whites. Mezirow (1998, pp. 187–188) has responded to these charges, noting that rationality is not in itself an ideology; rather, "the justification for embracing an ideology depends upon advancing and supporting reasons for doing so. ... Arguments against the universality of rationality and critical reflection themselves demonstrate the necessity of assessing reasons and becoming critical of assumptions. Once these critics enter into rational discourse, they have no choice but to agree to observe universal principles of rationality."

Although **Mezirow's (2000)** work briefly acknowledges other ways of making meaning, including intuition, imagination, and dreams, and acknowledges the role of feelings in the transformative learning process, **Taylor (2000a)** notes of Mezirow's theory that "critical reflection is granted too much importance and does not give enough attention to the significance of affective learning—the role of emotions and feelings in the process of transformation" (p. 303). Further, **Taylor (2000a)** cites several studies indicating that people's emotions must be worked through before they can engage in critical reflection. The interdependence of affect and critical reflection cannot be overlooked. For example, **Mulvihill (2003)** discusses the importance emotion plays in the transformative learning experiences of survivors of clergy abuse. Mulvihill writes, "When individuals and groups can be encouraged to uncover the emotional impact of perspectives and meanings, and to blend this information with other ways of knowing, a more holistic transformative paradigm might be embraced" (2003, p. 325). In addition, the exploration of feelings leads to greater self-awareness (**Taylor, 2001**).

As previously noted, other transformative learning scholars delve more deeply into the importance of learning through other ways of knowing, including emotion and intuition (**Blacksher, 2001**; **Johnson, 2001**), "soul learning" (**Dirkx, 1998**), and levels of consciousness (**Boucouvalas, 1993**), and through stories (**Rossiter, 2002**), the physical body (**Amann, 2003**), and the subconscious (**Scott, 1997**). For example, using Boyd's extrarational approach

to transformative learning as a framework for their study, **Kovan and Dirkx (2003)** sought to understand the "role of learning in sustaining commitment to nonprofit work" of environmentalists (p. 100). They discovered that the participants' transformative learning was "a struggle for consciousness in a largely unconscious world, a process that Jung referred to as individuation" (p. 107). For these participants, transformation was an ongoing process, which involves the whole person including the "head, heart and spirit" (p. 114).

Last, in an effort to explain how participants in several studies experienced a perspective transformation *without* critical reflection, **Taylor (2001)** explored the literature on neurobiology. He found that "nonconscious memory ... has a tremendous influence on how we think and act" (p. 228). He continues, "Implicit memory of experience can be received, stored and recovered without conscious awareness of the individual" (p. 226). Examples of implicit memory include learning category-level knowledge such as grammar. People know the rules of grammar but are unable to say exactly what guides their speaking. A second form of implicit memory is learning a conditioned response (**Taylor, 2001**). For example, people may be conditioned into accepting the norms of a new culture. **Taylor (1994)** found that people in cultures different from their own developed new habits and uncritically accepted many of the routines and norms of the culture. They "absorbed" cultural norms without trying to make meaning of them. Yet, despite this uncritical acceptance of the culture, participants reported experiencing a perspective transformation.

In sum, the charge that **Mezirow's (2000)** theory relies too heavily on rationality has sparked discussions about the role of feelings and the unconscious in the transformative learning process. In addition, researchers have explored how people experience a perspective transformation in the absence of critical reflection.

Role of Relationships in the Transformative Learning Process

Closely tied to the role of feelings in the transformational learning process is the role of relationships. **Taylor (2000a)** indicates the importance of "relational ways of knowing" (p. 306) in the

transformative learning process. In particular, he indicates that elements such as "trust, friendship, and support" are necessary for effective reflective or rational discourse to occur (p. 306). Receiving support, connecting with family, and developing trust were all ways in which relationships were evident in the transformative learning process.

Recent studies support the assertion that relationships are an important part of the transformative learning process. **Harvie (2004)** found that the transformative learning process for undergraduates was a highly social process, with interpersonal support being an important component of the process. Likewise, **Hwang (2004)** analyzed the transformative learning of Korean Presbyterian disciples in training. Hwang indicates, "The transformative learning experiences did not appear to rely upon rational discourse for critical reflection of assumptions. ... Instead, participants experienced transformative learning through relationship dialogue based on the relationships among group members and the relationship with God" (abstract).

Both the importance and the *nature* of the relationships in the transformative learning process have received attention (**Taylor, 2003**). For example, **Carter (2000)** uncovered four types of developmental relationships in the lives of midcareer women: utilitarian, memory, imaginative relationships with self, and love relationships. The author discovered: "Psychosocial support functions that predominate in love, memory and imaginative relationships generated proportionally more instances of transformative learning than did mostly career-enhancing functions of utilitarian relationships" (p. xiii).

Social Action

The place of social action in transformational learning theory remains controversial. Mezirow in particular has been criticized for focusing too much on individual transformation at the expense of social change. Mezirow (1990a, p. 363) indeed states that "we must begin with individual perspective transformations before social transformations can succeed." As previously mentioned, for Mezirow "action can mean making a decision, being critically reflective or transforming a meaning structure as well as a change

in behavior" (1995, pp. 58–59). Perspective transformation may also result in social action. For Mezirow, though, the role of adult education is to promote and facilitate individual critical reflection in which "the only anticipated learning outcome ... is a more rational and objective assessment of assumptions" (1995, p. 59). To assume that the outcome is social action is to require "the learner to share the convictions of the educator's own view of social reality [which] would be tantamount to indoctrination" (p. 59).

Both Freire and Mezirow have been criticized for romanticizing the social change process. Both educators "start with the oppressed or the person trapped within a culturally induced dependency role, and both require these victims to liberate themselves, albeit with the help of the dialogic or transformative educator" (**Newman, 1994**, p. 241). Newman believes this offers little help to those who are oppressed. Newman believes that adult teaching and learning should focus on identifying strategies to deal with oppression at the same time that we help learners "build up their skills, increase or regenerate their knowledge, and rework their meaning perspectives in order to be better able to carry out those strategies" (p. 241). Mezirow (1997b, p. 62) has responded to Newman's critique, arguing that "often learners are unaware of being oppressed; they internalize the values of the oppressors." In these situations, it may be necessary to engage in the "'deconstruction' of reified frames of reference" before action can be taken "on one's own behalf" (p. 62).

The Educator's Place in Fostering Transformative Learning

There is yet another dimension to this issue of the place of social action in transformational learning theory. The ethical issues involved have been little addressed. For example, what right do adult educators have to tamper with the worldview (mental set, perspective, paradigm, or state of consciousness) of the learner? How invasive is it to study adults in the process of transformation (**Courtenay et al., 2000**)? How is the goal of educational intervention, whether it is social or personal change or something else, to be determined? What is the educator's responsibility for the action component of praxis?

The educator who supports personal and social transformation as the goal of adult education is confronted by a more practical issue: how exactly to facilitate such learning. Brookfield (1987, 1996) offers some help through his critical questioning techniques and through a critical incident activity. **Daloz (1986)** suggests that mentors use the strategies of challenging, supporting, and visioning to facilitate the learner's personal journey of transformation. **Freire (1970)** and **Hart (1990)** discuss techniques for consciousness-raising in groups. **Vella (1994)** presents twelve principles of adult learning with specific case examples of their implementation in popular education sites around the world.

The most extensive discussions of techniques for fostering transformative learning can be found in Cranton's work (1996, 2002). Recognizing individual differences and learning preferences, Cranton suggests drawing from a repertoire of strategies, including critical questioning and experiential techniques such as role-plays and simulations, journal writing, and life histories. In addition, **Lamb (2003)** investigated best practices for fostering transformative learning in the workplace. She studied three corporate workplace programs that indicated transformative learning was an outcome. Lamb uncovered eight conditions that fostered transformative learning, including "putting participants in unfamiliar and new situations, ... maximizing the diversity mix of participants, ... and repeated team opportunities balancing action and reflection" (pp. 266–267).

Mezirow (1995) lays out the "ideal conditions" of discourse for fostering transformative learning, which have found some support in recent studies. **Taylor (2000b)** reviewed twenty-three empirical studies that explored the practice of fostering transformative learning in the classroom. He found that the studies supported Mezirow's ideal conditions for fostering transformative learning, including providing a trusting environment for learning, promoting autonomy and collaboration, and utilizing activities that "encourage exploration of alternative personal perspectives and critical reflection" (p. 9). Other themes that arose from the literature included "fostering group ownership and individual agency, ... promoting value-laden course content, ... recognizing the interrelationship of critical reflection and affective learning and the need for time" (p. 10).

To summarize this section on some of the unresolved issues surrounding transformative learning, it is clear that questions of context, rationality and affect, the role of relationships in the transformative learning process, social action, and implementation are not as discrete as presented. To understand the biographical and sociocultural context of the individual learner is to consider other equally if not more powerful ways of knowing than pure rationality. It also means to consider what the appropriate action might be as a result of personal transformation; clearly such action may reside with the person or may be mobilized for some form of collective, social action. Ethical and professional considerations pervade the process, a process that most adult educators are little prepared to handle.

Trends in the Transformational Learning Literature

Recently, scholars have looked more closely at the emotional and spiritual aspects of transformative learning (**Amann, 2003**; **Davis, 2003**; **Lennox, 2005**; **Ludwig, 2005**; **Sawyer, 2003**). For example, through in-depth interviews with twelve participants, **Davis (2003)** explored "the human experience of spirit and its relationship to the transformative learning process" (p. 130). Participants reported spiritual experiences, that is, "intrapersonal conversations with spirit" that were transformational (p. 132). This "dialogue with the soul" is unique to this form of transformative learning (p. 134). **Sawyer (2003)** detailed the role of cognition, emotion, and spirituality in cellular biologist Bruce Lipton's transformation from holding a "materialist-reductionist-determinist worldview ... to a quantum physics–based understanding of the universe, founded on energetics, holism and uncertainty" (p. 372). Sawyer concludes that Lipton's experiences help us see the relationship between the "cognitive, emotional, spiritual, physical, and behavioral dimensions of experience and pave the way for more integrative perspectives on how human beings learn, adapt, and grow" (p. 373).

A second area of inquiry includes transformative learning and technology (**Cranton & Dirkx, 2005**; **Cranton & Lin, 2005**; **Dirkx & Smith, 2005**; **Lewis, Adams, & Southern, 2005**). For example, **Cranton and Dirkx (2005)** explore how their online dialogue with

each other led them toward a more inclusive perspective on transformative learning. **Dirkx and Smith (2005)** examined how people "worked through the problem of the relationship of the individual to the group, and the transformative processes and dynamics associated with this learning and development" (p. 114). Findings suggested that while individuals valued collaborative online learning, they also wanted to be evaluated individually. Participants noted that the online format did not lend itself as well to social connections as a face-to-face course would have; they did not feel as connected to each other as they would have in a face-to-face course. The authors concluded that the facilitating process in the online environment needs more development in order to facilitate transformative learning.

A third area of interest involves transformative learning in the workplace. Transformative learning in groups and organizations is a topic of interest (**Baumgartner, 2001**). For example, **Yorks and Marsick (2000)** utilized action learning in an organization. Action learning involves people working in teams toward a solution to a problem. Through dialogue and reflection, the teams solved the problem, and the organizational culture was transformed. **Bierema (2005)** examined the need for critical human resource development education. She maintained that much of the HRD literature is performance-based. Bierema encouraged HRD educators to teach critical HRD by "building awareness of the many dimensions and contradictions inherent in HRD" (p. 36) and by helping learners critique and analyze HRD readings and the language used in the text. These techniques will help transform the field and practice of human resource development.

Summary

This chapter has presented a discussion of transformational learning theory. Probably more than any other approach, this theory has captured the attention of adult educators over the past fifteen years. Whether transformational learning will remain a centerpiece of adult learning theory is, of course, not predictable. It would seem, however, that the theoretical foundations presented by **Taylor (2005a)** are sufficiently robust to foster continued debate, discussion, and research.