

Dancing at the Crossroads: Recollections and Reflections on Jack Mezirow's Early Work¹

Ted Fleming, National University of Ireland Maynooth (Retired)
Victoria J. Marsick, Teachers College, Columbia University
Elizabeth Kasl, Independent Scholar
Amy D. Rose, Northern Illinois University (Retired)

Abstract: Four people who worked with Jack Mezirow in the 1970s return to re-engage with the concerns and preoccupations of the time. We re-collect Jack's interests in making theory and his always present concern for social change. The paper captures the personal Jack and the academic Mezirow and the ways that research and scholarship never quite escape the interests of the researcher. Though dancing was certainly not an activity one would associate with him, his open mind and eclectic scholarship—which we re-interpret as transdisciplinarity—is the form of dancing with which we associate him.

Key Words: Mezirow, perspective, theory building, critical theory

Introduction

Crossroads are complex and ambiguous as they imply that one has arrived and is also ready for departure. The four people of this symposium are at imaginary crossroads, having journeyed on paths from the 1970s that include knowing Jack Mezirow as he developed his vision of transformative learning. As pictured by Matisse in *Dance*, we celebrate our experiences of research and learning, refreshed by the swirling movement that will carry the dancers into further and future adventures of transformation. We are reminded of Toni Morrison's words accepting the 1996 Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award where she spoke of the "dance of the open mind" and the importance of "experiencing one's own mind dancing with another's" (Morrison, 1996). Our experiences, recollected and shared, are that Jack engaged in the dance of the open mind. In that same spirit we approach this symposium.

The members of the symposium at slightly different times were Jack's students at Teachers College and/or researchers who all became in various ways colleagues and sometimes friends. This privilege was not ours alone. Many more enjoyed this experience, but few can recall the beginnings of the research and how the theory emerged. We tell two kinds of stories. There are those that locate his thinking in a set of experiences of adult education and community development, in a serious critique he made of the state of the field. The absence of theoretical grounding for adult learning and adult education drove his quest for theory, informed by his wide reading of many, such as Dewey, Tough, Knowles, Freire, Blumer, Kelly, Glaser and Strauss, Habermas and many more. This was partnered by a lifelong pursuit of his interest in social justice and social change—often not clearly evident in how the debates progressed over the subsequent decades.

Other stories are personal and some are told in this symposium. They are equally revealing of his ways of being Jack, a reluctant dancer (as Elizabeth recounts), a man private with his personal life and thoughts, always and hugely supportive of students, colleagues and

¹ Fleming, T., Marsick, V.J., Kasl, E. and Rose, A.D. (2016). Dancing at the Crossroads: Recollections and Reflections on Jack Mezirow's early work. Seminar Paper presented at XII International Transformative Learning Conference Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma WA 2016. In Nicolaides, A. & Holt, D. (Eds.). (2016). *Engaging at the Intersections* (pp. 87-99). Proceedings of the XII International Transformative Learning Conference: Tacoma, WA: Pacific Lutheran University.

friends but restless and occasionally abrasive when he thought something important was at stake. Our main task is to recollect with intent. Our reflections are about capturing the genesis of ideas that have had a significant impact on theory and practice. The original motivations for transformation theory reveal important work done but not yet completed. In particular, we underscore that, for Mezirow, transformative education *is* about social change. These papers recollect with the intention of continuing to develop a theory that is living and dynamic—its potential yet unrealized.

The Rest of the Story: Mezirow's Early Search for Theory and Social Change

Amy D. Rose

While most discussions begin with Mezirow's 1978 article in *Adult Education* (1978b), for this paper I am using it as an end point. My intent here is to introduce the various strands of thought that are closely linked to the development of transformative learning. In particular, I examine Mezirow's writings and thoughts on community development, qualitative research, evaluation, and theory development. The story of the generation of Mezirow's ideas about transformative learning, or as it was then called perspective transformation, is well known. This narrative, as presented by Mezirow in his first paper, was that "a friend" experienced a marked transformation after returning to college as an adult. This story was later expanded to include the information that the friend was his wife, Edee, who returned as an adult to Sarah Lawrence College's program for adult women. Based on this experience, Mezirow submitted a grant proposal to study women's re-entry programs in community colleges. The proposal was funded and the project initiated in 1975. This narrative is true as far as it goes. However, what it leaves out is the body of work and thought that Mezirow brought to his initial view of transformative learning or perspective transformation.

First I need to introduce myself. I met Jack Mezirow when I started to work for him in 1975. My background was in history and I had just finished a master's in medieval history. After starting the adult education master's program, I was invited to become a research assistant and full-time graduate student in adult education. After I completed my master's I became the project manager. However, in searching for a dissertation topic I returned to my first love, history, much to Jack's consternation.

The women's project was not a study of perspective transformation. It was an evaluation project. Jack's work on perspective transformation emerged from cherry-picked data that had been collected for different reasons. The first publication coming out of the project was an evaluation guide (Mezirow & Rose, 1978). This guide was to be disseminated to re-entry programs around the country as a way of beginning their own evaluation processes. The second publication was a monograph that laid out Mezirow's (1978a) theory of perspective transformation.

I will attempt to establish the ways that Mezirow drew on his previous work as he developed and refined his ideas about transformation. This is important, not only because it provides some much needed background, but also because it allows us to better understand both the political and subversive aspects of Mezirow's work. Both of these have gotten lost over the years.

Formative Strands

In this section, I briefly lay out the basic strands of Mezirow's early views. Furthermore, I understand that Mezirow himself departed from his beginnings. However, I still think it is important to situate his early thinking more accurately than has been done previously.

Community Development

For much of his early career, Mezirow was involved in community development in the US and abroad. That part of his career, particularly his work in Pakistan, serves as the backdrop for his later thinking. In particular, he developed his focus on perspective as part of this work. He saw aid workers come into a country and pay little attention to the needs of the people being served. Writing about this upon his return, he complained about the administrative obstacles, the lack of attention to the culture of Pakistan and the cavalier way that village inhabitants were disregarded through the same top-down approach. In effect, Mezirow saw community development as the antithesis of modernization theory that permeated development work. He labeled his view of community development as "growth perspective" (1963, p. 86).

Theory-Building

Before beginning his doctoral work in adult education, Mezirow had studied the Foundations of Education at the University of Minnesota. In his early work, he was concerned with the lack of theory in adult education. Although he came from a Foundations background he criticized the fact that adult educators limited their premises to social philosophy instead of theorizing more deeply. He wrote:

Theorizing has been almost entirely limited to social philosophy given largely to refining differences in emphasis between those contending major focus should be placed either upon educational processes involved in group interaction and community development or on more orthodox forms of teaching adults about the culture with emphasis on liberal arts and the humanities. The continuing dialogue has contributed little toward improving the quality of professional activity. This chapter suggests a rationale and strategy for the systematic development of an integrated body of inductively formulated generalizations with which adult educators can understand and predict behavior of adults in educational situations. What is proposed is research-based qualitative theory, indigenous to adult education and capable of indicating dependable and practical guidelines for policy and program decision making. (1969, p. 3)

There are several points to note here. The first is his desire to develop an inductively generated theory of adult education. Also important is his view that much of what is written is unusable. He is particularly concerned with the lack of a rigorous methodology. At this early stage, Mezirow draws on his work from Pakistan to emphasize the importance of understanding the perspectives of all participants in the development of theory. Thus his call for theory was embedded in his recognition of the importance of qualitative research and in particular the work of Glaser and Strauss and their development of grounded theory.

Qualitative Research

For Mezirow, research methods and the subsequent generation of theory were at the heart of understanding adult education. Both in his early thinking, and in the ways that developed his

ideas about perspective transformation, he was committed to understanding phenomena through close and immersive study (at least in theory, the actual practice was something else). There were several aspects to Mezirow's thinking about qualitative research. Initially, he relied heavily on Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism and the ways that individuals interpret and then restructure meaning. In that view, we can't understand behavior without first analyzing the meaning that individuals attach to their own situations and social relations. Building on his understanding of Blumer, Mezirow advocated the use of grounded theory as a way of gathering information and theorizing. In particular, Mezirow emphasized the importance of individual perspective. Mezirow was drawn to grounded theory because of its implicit connection to predictive research. In his view, research needed ultimately to be predictive if it was to be useful in the real world. This insistence created a tension in his work that was ultimately resolved by turning solely to theory building.

Evaluation

Mezirow used his newly gained insights on research in his study of Adult Basic Education programs by pioneering a qualitative approach to evaluation that he called Perspective Discrepancy Assessment. This meant examining the perspectives of all stakeholders and looking for the gaps between their expectations and their views about what was really happening. Analysis of these gaps could lead to insights about program issues and in particular, policy failures. He worried that the top-down evaluation models lost the voices of participants and those working in programs. This approach was utilized to great effect in *Last Gamble on Education* (Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975), which actually resulted in national policy changes.

Conclusions

This brief explication of some broad strands from Mezirow's early work is aimed at providing a framework for understanding both the women's study and Mezirow's early work on perspective transformation. The first is that everything he did was premised on his ideas about social change. Mezirow was committed to social change and saw education and his ideas about perspective as central to this change. Additionally, by looking at this early work, we are struck by his insistence on going beyond behavior and looking at intent. He was adamant that education involved understanding individual perspectives. This does not necessarily negate the critique that Mezirow relied too heavily on the cognitive. It does, however, introduce new pieces to the puzzle—that deserve further exploration.

Dancing to Different “Women's-Re-Entry-Study” Tunes

Victoria J. Marsick

In this paper as well as in a previous reflection (Marsick, 2015), I dance with Mezirow's theorizing about Perspective Transformation (PT) based on re-view of four research memos—discovered in the late Mezirow's papers—that I had written as doctoral student and Research Assistant. I was struck by how my memos pointed to Honneth's later recognition theory (Fleming, 2014). Each memo examined, respectively: goals, processes, blocking conditions, and the Women's Movement—vis-à-vis building self-confidence in the Northern California programs studied. I became curious about Mezirow's choices as he theorized PT vs. mine as I

explored programmatic self-confidence building and social support. Our respective interests influenced the melodies we each “heard” and how our theorizing choreography unfolded.

Jack was my mentor; over time he and his wife, Edee, became dear friends. I met them while working with World Education, a not-for-profit organization that is dedicated to participatory development, literacy, and women’s and girls’ education. I helped identify and support projects in Southeast Asia; built relationships with national counterparts; and assisted, and learned from, Mezirow and other project consultants.

Guided by Mezirow’s thinking, I eventually enrolled for a Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) to study with professors Jack admired while teaching at UCB Extension. I gathered and analyzed observational and interview data from California community colleges in the women’s study, while learning grounded theory with Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser. Eventually, I joined Mezirow, Brookfield, Kasl and others as Teachers College faculty, and enjoyed watching Mezirow think in action as he developed his views on Transformative Learning.

Women’s Movement: Context and Nuance

As Rose emphasizes in her paper, “the primary thrust” of the Women’s Re-Entry study was to “promote the replication of successful programs and contribute guidelines for program evaluation” (Mezirow, 1978a, p. 1). Mezirow, however, emphasized Perspective Transformation (PT), even though interviews did not focus on life histories of women as did a later study of students returning to higher education in Europe (Fleming & Finnegan, 2014).

Mezirow (1978a) described “the feeling of discontent”—that Betty Friedan’s “problem without a name” had identified—as key, “apart from the re-entry experience” to “exposure to the rapidly changing social norms” that affected women in the study (p. 7). Programs had embedded “consciousness raising, for many the heart of the women’s movement” as central to examining assumptions and “becoming aware of hitherto unquestioned cultural myths (often internalized and reinforced by women themselves)” in finding “a new identity within a new meaning perspective entailing greater autonomy, enhanced personal control, and a sense of responsibility for their own lives.” Mezirow continued: While “re-entry programs seldom use the term ‘consciousness raising’ . . . There is little doubt . . . that this is seen as their central educational mission and that their effectiveness goes far beyond that of the usual consciousness raising group” (Mezirow, 1978a, p. 8).

Mezirow was critiqued for inadequately contextualizing his theorizing of PT within the women’s movement and consciousness raising. His emphasis seen above—and my personal recollection of conversations over the course of the study—suggest he did not ignore context, but perhaps took for granted that readers would understand the historical setting and socio-cultural milieu, and hence did not further elaborate.

However, re-reading my memos, I am puzzled at Mezirow’s strong portrayal of programs as embracing consciousness raising in curricula. My memos suggest greater nuance, at least in California. For example, I wrote that it was “difficult to tell whether or not, and to what extent, this c.r. [consciousness raising] enters into building of self-concept since often c.r. relates to *group* goals of women’s movement and not to individual growth *per se* [original emphasis] unless this happens to coincide with group growth.” I also cited evidence that there were “mixed feelings by directors of programs, but [they] generally shy away from calling classes c.r. *per se* [original emphasis].” One Director “said classes were ‘sort of’ like c.r.” However, “[a different Director] contradicts this in agreeing with me that ‘too much of this Lib stuff was threatening’ .”

Yet another Director “said she stays away from the things [a women’s program] does in order to consciousness-raise about the role of women or otherwise hook into ‘liberation things’ because it is ‘dangerous’ and women are threatened by these concepts.” At another College, I noted that a “director believes program is ‘beyond consciousness raising’ in that it moves instead to transferring heightened awareness into skills to use in jobs, careers and community.” These examples show wide variation in embrace of consciousness raising.

Some staff based in Women’s Studies (W.S.) saw consciousness raising as “definitely a political tool,” but overt identification with Women’s Liberation varied. Teachers adjusted program stance to their own or local women’s norms: “Not that we’re radical feminists, or anything, but we felt we should make our presence known” as when teachers “organized ‘Alice Doesn’t Day.’” There was disagreement about women’s roles, e.g., arguments by women staff about “calling women ‘girls’” or references to “women who still enjoy baking and cooking.” Programs also differentiated curriculum and focus for race or class, e.g., “black women at [a different college] were more tuned into black identity than women’s movement.” I concluded that “c.r. might be more apt to work in the W.S. programs than in the re-entry programs where women’s movement is not primary reason for the women’s return to school.”

Links to Self-Confidence Building

There was “evidence that some directors...consider one important goal of the program to be the building of self-confidence” which was “defined variously in terms of a generalized ability to direct lives, and specific abilities to cope successfully with...the college experience.” I saw the program logic as follows:

self-confidence relates to building of self-concept...in that it provides a minimum level of acceptance—by others and by the self; so that person can take risks and make decisions by self, & get feedback through the program,...the wider environment of the college, the family with whom living (while changing) and the broader working community and living community. The feedback can be handled safely, in a supportive environment..., so that the woman can then either lose or gain ground in the specific situation without being shattered.... Self-confidence for its own sake is not the real goal; but understanding of self so that woman can reach out intelligently for those things in life that will be good for her and are realistic.

Women’s issues were interpreted by educators to help women learn:

Different teachers handle women’s issues differently, but all are selected for their sensitivity to women’s perspective [whether men or women].... Effect of bringing out women’s point of view is to 1) make it safe for women to bring in their own experience, and not feel as if this is irrelevant; 2) aid in opening up life boundaries of women to wider issues of women in America and world; 3) at times, politicize women in becoming aware of their 2nd class citizenship in America.

Thus, programs trod lightly on what women *should* be, and instead helped women find what were uniquely their strengths—even though they sometimes did “replace old tapes” with temporary “group identity” as a transition from old to new identities.

Conclusion

Mezirow was influenced by his wife’s experience and his own intellectual interests, e.g., Dewey, Freire, community development, adult learning—as other papers here suggest. I was influenced by my stage of personal and academic life. We danced at the intersections of Women’s Re-entry Programs to different tunes. The 1978 report was choreographed, though it includes different melodies and dance steps—PT (2 chapters), program support/confidence building (2 chapters), as well as the funder’s purpose of program dynamics (4 chapters). My own gendered dance and life experience led me to focus on collaborative program micro-cultures supporting transition and the push for shift in collectively-held norms and practices. Mezirow focused on individuals directing their own lives for many reasons, perhaps including life circumstances growing up male to the music of mid-West rugged individualism. With roots in social action, Mezirow admired individuals who stood up for change. The newspaper picture in Tiananmen Square of a single Chinese man confronting a tank had pride of place on his office door—reflecting perhaps a key melodic theme he heard and developed through his work.

Dancing with Jack

Elizabeth Kasl

In introducing the first comprehensive description of his theory about the transformative dimensions of adult learning, Jack Mezirow (1991) explains his intention:

...There is need for a learning theory that can explain how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence the way they construe experience, the dynamics involved in modifying meanings, and the way the structures of meanings themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional. These understandings must be explained in the context of adult development and social goals. A learning theory centered on meaning, addressed to educators of adults, could provide a firm foundation for a philosophy of adult education from which appropriate practices...could be derived. (p. xii)

Jack’s desire to create “a learning theory centered on meaning” as a foundation for educational practice was taking shape in the decades preceding his 1991 book. I had the opportunity to be present. My personal relationship with Jack began in 1969 when I was a new doctoral student at Columbia University’s Teachers College. Jack was my academic advisor and teacher.

In the mid-1970s, Jack created a seminar he called “How Adults Learn.” Only six of us signed up, so we were privileged to engage in lively conversations. These covered an eclectic range of topics that attracted Jack’s curiosity. In retrospect, our class was a cauldron in which perspective transformation was cooking. During the 1976 Adult Education Association meeting, I attended a panel of scholars talking about the state of the field. Jack spoke about the need for a

theory of adult learning, using many ideas explored in our seminar. When he finished, there was immediate and sustained applause. I remember feeling surprised, “I haven’t seen people clap with such enthusiasm after an academic paper.”

Context for Theory Development

Mezirow’s assessment about adult educators’ need for a learning theory that explains meaning making is situated in the context of the 1970s. Three factors, which I have explored more fully elsewhere (Kasl, 2015), are especially relevant.

New fields of scholarship about adult development were emerging as psychologists became aware that development continued after adolescence. Of particular interest to Mezirow were the constructivists who studied meaning making—the epistemological developmentalists who followed the lead of William Perry (1970) and the psychosocial stage theorists, especially psychoanalyst Roger Gould (1972), with whom Jack studied during a sabbatical.

Since they were concerned with meaning making, developmental theorists pioneered innovative methods for analyzing interview data, countering the dominant psychological research practices that relied on hypothesis-testing designs and statistical methodologies. Similar protocols dominated adult education research. As an early advocate for qualitative inquiry in adult education, Jack dismissed statistical approaches with a shrug, “You don’t find out anything worth knowing.”

Another important contextual component was the content of adult education discourse. Two dominant topics—motivation to participate, and self-directed learning—were initiated by interview studies (Houle, 1961; Tough, 1971), but quickly redirected to large statistical projects. A third dominant topic was andragogy, energized by Malcolm Knowles with the 1970 publication of *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy vs. Pedagogy*.

Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning

Thus, Mezirow’s professional context was saturated with discourse about participation statistics, frequency of self-directed learning, and the efficacy of educational program practices based on assumptions about uniquely adult needs. Mezirow considered this situation, found it wanting, and conceptualized an inquiry about adult learning that not only guided him for decades, but also changed the discourse in our field.

In addition to Mezirow’s quest to understand meaning making, he valued knowledge from multiple sources:

A disturbing fault line separates theories of adult learning from the practice of those who try to help adults learn. Psychologists interested in adult learning often find themselves trapped within the framework of particular theories and paradigms. . . . Philosophers, linguists, sociologists, and political scientists also have legitimate interests in adult learning, but each group has a different frame of reference and a different vocabulary. . . . Few efforts have been made to develop a synthesis of the different theories that educators of adults can use. (1991, p. xi)

Jack’s enterprise is his effort to develop such a synthesis. His voracious appetite for reading across a broad range of disciplines and his gift for integrating constructs from different frames of reference provide us with an adult learning theory that is transdisciplinary.

A Theory in Progress

Jack was always eager to engage in theoretical conversation. He often responded in writing to critiques of his thinking (Baumgartner, 2012), not as defense, but from desire to be actively involved in thinking with others about “how adults learn.”

Jack’s desire for ongoing dialogue was the driving force for creation of the transformative learning conference, which he initiated in 1998. He wanted to gather people who were interested in further development of transformation theory. He said during an early conference that he had contributed what he had to offer and now looked to others to expand and revise, so that the theory would always be “in progress.”

The Man as Context for Future Directions

Any theory is the construction of its creator. Jack Mezirow gravitated most easily to the abstract thinking and rational discourse that embodies his writing and theoretical vision. But he wanted to be a continuing learner, to engage with others in thinking about adult learning and meaning making. As we think about the future of transformative learning theory and the conference that serves it, we can learn from Jack’s openness to alternative perspectives that feel unfamiliar.

One of my favorite memories captures this openness. It is from an encounter Jack and I shared during the second transformative learning conference. This conference included plenary sessions that focused on one of the four ways of knowing described by John Heron (1992)—experiential, presentational, propositional, practical. The plenary representing experiential knowing used movement. Instructions were given to find a partner: Working in silence, each partner would communicate through movement a personal experience of transformative learning. In a second step, partners would mirror each other’s movement. The pairs would continue mirroring until each was satisfied that the partner captured the essence of his or her transformative learning experience. Continuing in silence, partners would then create a new movement that synergized the elements of both partners’ experiential knowing.

I happened to be sitting opposite Jack while the instructions were explained. I was pretty sure he would leave as soon as the activity began, so I was ready to bolt across the room to catch him. As he was slipping out the door, I stepped in front of him and smiled my invitation, “Please be my partner for the exercise.” He shook his head no, but I persisted, gently touching his shoulder. “Please. Let’s try. See what it’s like.” Ever polite, he reluctantly agreed. We worked in private out in the hallway. Both of us were uncomfortable with the activity, so our beginning efforts were awkward and shy. But something magical happened, and as we concentrated on mirroring each other, self-consciousness fell away. We created a synergized movement that ended with smiles and expressed appreciation, then walked together back into the conference space.

At the end of the weekend, I drove Jack to the airport, which was about an hour’s trip. We talked about his hopes for the future of the transformative learning conferences and about the California conference we had just experienced. He said he had learned a lot, so I asked, “What stands out for you as something you learned here?” He took a few moments to gather his thoughts and said, “People talk a lot about multiple ways of knowing. I think I have a better idea now of what they mean by that.”

In Jack's later writing, he never demonstrated deep understanding about the transformative power of multiple ways of knowing; what I value is his realization that perspectives other than his own should be included and his effort to do so.

Dancing Minds: Mezirow and Habermas meet Honneth

Ted Fleming

From 1978 to 1980 Jack was my academic advisor at Teachers College. I researched for him a literature review of journal articles on critical theory. Later, as colleagues, we discussed the genesis of his theory, problems that had emerged and solutions. Since then I have written about the connections between Habermas and education. One question and a critique underpin this work. It involves the widely held notion that transformation theory does not include an adequate understanding of the social dimension of learning. Academic colleagues and students frequently repeat the critique that transformation theory has an overly individual oriented understanding of learning. Rather than join the critique I set about finding a 'fix' with generous support from Jack (Fleming, 2002).

The first step built on theoretical grounding supplied by Habermas who had a clear social dimension in his theory of communicative action. Critical reflection on assumptions is built most often on a community of rational argument. The second step was a more tentative study of Bowlby's attachment theory as a way of understanding how frames of reference are developed in early childhood relationships of care and security. The parent-child relationship produces internal working models and meaning schemes (Fleming, 2008) that form the secure foundation for engagement with the world. The third and most recent step asked: If transformation theory is grounded in critical theory, what insights can be gleaned from recent developments in critical theory (Honneth) that may enhance transformation theory—apart from the Frankfurt School's critique of neo-liberalism?

Context and Background: Mezirow and Habermas

Without being a critical theorist, but in order to give invaluable intellectual rigour to his work, Mezirow borrowed these ideas from Habermas:

The knowledge-generating emancipatory cognitive interest that informed the emancipatory learning of transformation theory;

Critical self-reflection modelled on the kind of critical explorations involved in Freud's psychoanalysis or Marx's critique of ideology;

The kinds of discourse described in communicative action theory that in turn—with its rules—gave transformation theory a facilitating methodology;

The understanding that distorted communication—including colonization of the lifeworld and the demise of the public sphere—best described the pathology of capitalism.

Each of these, in turn, is re-interpreted by Honneth giving the communicative turn of Habermas a recognition turn (Honneth, 1995) and, more recently, an emancipatory turn that together have reconfigured critical theory (Honneth, 2014). Axel Honneth is the successor to Habermas as Director of the Frankfurt School and Professor at Columbia University.

Crossroads: Honneth meets Habermas—And the Dance Continues

According to Honneth, the struggle for recognition is a human experience. Infants, when they express fear and anxiety, seek recognition for their feelings and a (good-enough) carer is prompted by the reciprocal dynamics of the carer-child relationship to provide reassurance. The appropriate carer's response produces in the infant a developmental prompt to grow, increase self-confidence and form an identity. The developmental struggle for recognition is not confined to infants or children but continues throughout life – a lifelong pursuit of recognition (like Bowlby's lifelong pursuit of attachment). The struggle for recognition drives social change and appropriate recognition of this struggle is a pre-condition for involvement in discussion, dialogue, critical reflection and democratic will-formation. Social justice and good parenting are connected and require each other. This suggests a new interpretation of the connection between the personal and the social (structure and agency). In this way the social and individual are inextricably linked. The political is personal.

Recognition has other domains and is also provided through laws. Communities and societies institutionalize recognition by including in laws the recognition of rights—to education, to the pursuit of happiness, to free speech, to a living wage, and especially the rights of people of color, disabled people and other minorities to equal treatment under the law. This is developmental, as individual needs are taken to a social and policy level and the deepest desires and needs of people are acknowledged.

Finally, in the realm of the economy and work through labour laws, regulations of the market place, consumer rights and trade union rights, recognition is given to the aspirations of workers and consumers.

It is not surprising that each of these three areas suggests corresponding forms of misrecognition—from child abuse and family violence, to laws that exclude, and work practices such as unemployment.

Honneth (2014) has reconfigured how critical theory understands emancipation stating that the three areas of intimate relations, laws, and work provide opportunities to realize emancipation. Freedom in any of these areas relies on its achievement in the others. This Hegelian shift gives an emancipatory turn to his work, in addition to the recognition turn.

In what ways can these successive “turns” have implications for transformation theory? The following aspects of transformation theory are re-interpreted as a result of Honneth's work. Critical reflection is best understood not as an individual oriented process but as a process requiring interpersonal recognition for its creation and realization. Indeed, the activity of critical reflection, so often seen as an overly rational activity, is now softened as it is grounded in an interpersonal activity of recognition and respect. This is already clearly stated in both Habermas and Mezirow (2000).

New Steps: Mezirow meets Honneth about Transformation Theory

As part of the elaboration of phases in the process of transformation, disorienting dilemmas are key (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). Now, in the light of Honneth, I suggest that the struggle for recognition is in fact a disorienting dilemma. In a recent EU funded study of adults returning to higher education it was the struggle for recognition that provided the most useful sensitizing concept in this longitudinal study informed by grounded theory (Fleming & Finnegan, 2014). The dilemma for prospective students was whether to remain in low paid, unsatisfying jobs or avail themselves of education that would give them recognition—of their intelligence and potential so often not experienced in early school years or at work.

The kinds of discourse that Mezirow suggested would support transformative learning are now not only (if they ever were) following rules of engagement but are significant moments of interpersonal solidarity and empathy (Kasl & Yorks, 2016). Empathy is both a pre-requisite for discourse and critical reflection, and an outcome. This captures Freire's assertion that "true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking" (1970, p. 80).

Identifying one's personal problem with a significant social issue (another step) can now be re-stated so that these interpersonal and social moments are dialectically connected in much the same way that Freire reconfigured such dualisms in his understanding of praxis.

Re-engagement with society on the basis of transformed meaning schemes can also be seen as infused with recognition and respect. Not only are new meaning schemes more inclusive and discriminating of experience and more open to further transformation, but they are now loaded with recognition. It would be unusual if disorienting dilemmas, which are struggles for recognition, did not result in increased ability to receive and give recognition.

The pedagogy of transformation and teaching is also now less abstract and rests not only on an ability to teach through critical analysis but see that this is grounded in respect and recognition. This may be what Maxine Greene meant when she described good teaching as being a "friend of someone else's mind." As a participant in the field of adult education that was endowed with practitioners but less so by theorists, Jack Mezirow added a clear path, agile footwork and steps for those excited by the learning of dancing minds.

Recollections and Reflections

What useful results might we highlight as a result of our recollections and reflections—apart from anticipating an interesting and thought provoking discussion at the symposium? We allude strongly to a transformative learning project that is still in process, to its incompleteness, and to potential yet to be realized.

The initial task set by Mezirow for himself and the field still remains an important starting point: a learning theory that describes how adults make meaning. In his creative and imaginative distilling of a lifetime of reading along with his own (and Edee's) life and learning experiences, he forged a living theory—giving expression to long-held interest in theory building. These ingredients of life experience and reading are strong influences not only on this theory, but also on all our work as writers, researchers and teachers. We might learn something worthwhile about our own perspectives and meaning schemes by paying attention to these aspects of our own minds, however more fascinating it may be to try exploring the minds of others.

As authors, we also want to affirm our understanding that transformation theory is deeply rooted in a view that education is for social action and social change. This was always Jack's intention, though not always clear from his published work. His explicit intent was to avoid overly individualistic notions of learning and instead to highlight the purpose of education as social change.

Many critiques of transformation theory have been made—and too often repeated—without further examining them or addressing the perceived weakness. There is always room for a re-think and Mezirow's open mind, if sometimes reluctantly, incorporated these into his thinking. One of the significant criticisms addresses the "magpie tendency" in his reading and publishing. We mean by this the eclectic gathering of ideas from many disciplines. This may have been an attempt to bolster his position with rigor, but it was also an expression of his

interest in making connections with a broad range of ideas and different disciplines' frames of reference. However, if the borrowings were wide, they were also selective. He is perceived as borrowing ideas—for pragmatic reasons (for example from Habermas), without paying appropriate attention to the context of the ideas he borrowed.

We believe this “magpie” approach might be interpreted as an exercise in transdisciplinarity, although that is not a construct yet being explored when Mezirow was developing his theory. Transdisciplinarity has been described as a creative and imaginative drive to explore meta-knowing that is driven by curiosity about a question, to be answered by tapping into multiple disciplines rather than being constrained by the boundaries of one or a few (Montuori, 2005). As a result, one has a creative coalition of supporting ideas that transcends the paradigms of discipline-based inquiry. Or, as Mezirow called it, meta-learning.

Finally, we have tried to express in our dance, years of research, learning and teaching now distilled in a critical choreography that is already thoughtful but also ready to be refreshed by the swirl and movement and steps, so that the next journey along one road or another will carry the dancers into further and future adventures of transformation.

References

- Baumgartner, L. (2012). Mezirow's theory of transformative learning from 1975 to present. In E.W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 99-115). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fleming, T. (2002). Habermas on civil society, lifeworld and system: Unearthing the social in Transformation Theory. *Teachers College Record*, 1-17.
URL: <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?ContentID=10877>
- Fleming, T. (2008). A secure base for adult learning: Attachment theory and adult education. *The Adult Learner*, 25, 33-53.
URL: http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/9050_adult_learn_for_web.pdf
- Fleming, T. (2014). Axel Honneth and the struggle for recognition: Implications for transformative learning. In A. Nicolaidis & D. Holt (Eds.), *Spaces of transformation and transformation of space. Proceedings of the 11th International Transformative Learning Conference*, (pp. 318-324). New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Fleming, T., & Finnegan, F. (2014). Critical theory and non-traditional students in Irish higher education. In F. Finnegan, B. Merrill & C. Thunborg (Eds.), *Student voices on inequalities in European higher education* (pp. 51-62). London: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Seabury Press.
- Gould, R. (1972). The phases of adult life: Study in developmental psychology. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 129, 521-531.
- Heron, J. (1992). *Feeling and personhood: Psychology in another key*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Honneth, A. (1995). *The Struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Honneth, A. (2014). *Freedom's right: The social foundations of democratic life*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Houle, C. (1961). *The inquiring mind*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Kasl, E. (2015). Jack Mezirow: Theorist, researcher, practitioner, learner (closing session panel tribute to Jack Mezirow). In J. Zacharakis & R. A. Collins (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 56th*

- Annual Adult Education Research Conference* (pp. 27-32), Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, May 19-21.
- Kasl, E., & Yorks, L. (2016). Do I really know you? Do you really know me? Empathy amid diversity in differing learning contexts. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 66, 3-20.
- Knowles, M.S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy vs. pedagogy*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Marsick, V. J. (2015). Examining the role of programmatic social support in Mezirow's Women's Re-Entry Program Research. In M. L. DeNatale, V. J. Marsick, S. Spennati, & C. Simonetti, *Transformative learning e pedagogia degli adulti*. Milan: Catholic University of Milan.
- Mezirow, J. D. (1963). *Dynamics of community development*. New York, NY: Scarecrow Press.
- Mezirow, J. D. (1969). Toward a theory of practice in education with particular reference to the education of adults. Minneapolis, MN: Adult Education Research Conference. ED 036 755.
- Mezirow, J. D., with contributions by Marsick, V. (1978a). *Education for perspective transformation*. New York: Center for Adult Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Mezirow, J. D. (1978b). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28(2), 100-110.
doi:10.1177/074171367802800202
- Mezirow, J. D. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow J. D. (2000). Learning to think like an adult. In J. D. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3-33). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. D., Darkenwald, G.G., & Knox, A. B. (1975). *Last gamble on education: Dynamics of adult basic education*. Washington, D. C.: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A.
- Mezirow, J. D., & Rose, A. D. (1978). *An evaluation guide for college women's Re-entry programs*. New York: Center for Adult Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Montuori, A. (2005). Gregory Bateson and the promise of transdisciplinarity. *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 12(1-2), 147-158.
- Morrison, T. (1996). The dancing mind.
URL: http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_tmorrison.html#.V4Tcx6JSSPc
- Perry, W. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Tough, A. (1971). *The adult's learning projects; A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.