
Foreword

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Jack Mezirow frequently spoke about the affinity he had with the emerging transformative learning community he met on his visit to Greece in 2007. He enjoyed conversations about the nature of thinking and meaning-making. Greece now finds itself at challenging crossroads. There is little scope for dancing, in a nation that loves to dance! The economic catastrophe, fraught relationships with the EU, and austerity are major crises. Refugees pose challenges for Greek generosity.

The authors of this collection reread in reflective and thought-provoking ways, the texts of Paulo Freire, Roger Gould, Maxine Greene, and many others. I call this bibliographic knowledge. It is in contrast to biographical knowledge which is the knowledge that those have who knew Jack. I refer to this as *reading Jack* in contrast to the former that I refer to as *reading Mezirow*. As the number of times Mezirow referenced Habermas or Freire are counted, we may overlook Jack's personal concerns for social justice and social change. This knowledge resides mainly in biographical knowledge. In recent papers four colleagues, former students, researchers and friends of Jack Mezirow retold their biographical knowledge (Fleming, Marsick, Kasl, & Rose, 2016) and continued earlier reflections started by Kasl (2015) and Rose (2015).

Mezirow had a lifelong interest in social justice and social change that was not always evident in his bibliographic work and this led many to assert that transformation theory lacks a social dimension. His work in Pakistan, Thailand and with the U.S. Government informed his thinking about transformative learning as did his extensive reading of Dewey, Tough, Knowles, Freire, Blumer, Kelly, Glaser and Strauss, Habermas and many more.

I remember Mezirow, and later Freire, publically acknowledging the role their respective wives played in the development of their theories. Elsa may well have *loaned* her ideas on conscientization to Paulo. Edee certainly prompted Jack in ways that may be more significant than the empirical research on the origins of perspective transformation. Edee's studies at Sarah Lawrence College and her reading of Fingarette (1963) are real and inspiring sources of key concepts in

Jack's work. These moments include partners as thinking collaborators in the development of theory.

Biographical knowledge (as distinguished from bibliographical knowledge) provides a more rounded understand of how theory is created and developed. Theory emerges gradually, in discreet iterations over a lifespan. It is partial, located in particular times and places with social and policy contexts and indeed a biography. Theoretical concerns are located in biographies and sustaining relationships. Even in the best thought out bibliographical articulation of a theory there is also, for the authors in this collection, a biography of how these ideas emerge in a life and career. It may sometimes (always?) take a lifetime to understand, present, defend, integrate, and critique one's chosen set of informing ideas that even then are always provisional and in progress.

From the 1960s Mezirow (Fleming, et al., 2016; Kasl, 2015) was concerned about the lack of theory in adult education and proposed a "... research-based qualitative theory, indigenous to adult education and capable of indicating dependable and practical guidelines for policy and program decision making" (Mezirow, 1969, p. 3).

Mezirow's work can be divided into eras: his early work until 1975; his empirical research leading to perspective transformation in 1978; attempts to firmly establish the foundations of this work by connecting it with Dewey, Fingarette, Blumer, Freire, Kuhn, and most importantly, the work of Habermas. He spent a lengthy period of time presenting and defending core concepts (discourse, critical self-reflection) against critics (Newman) and the integration of ideas from a number of authors who illuminated how we think and learn (Gould, Greene, Argyris, Marsick, and Kegan). Mezirow was relentless articulating these ideas in the face of critics. He was stubborn and was reluctant to dilute core ideas in the light of those proposing nonrational paths to transformation. His ideas developed through friendships with collaborators at home and abroad – in the UK, Ireland, Greece, and Australia – and with Belenky, Illeris, Jarvis, Taylor, Kegan, Dirkx, and Kokkos.

Mezirow's ambitious theory emerged from the educational concerns and developments of the 1970s. According to Kasl (2015), adult developmental psychology showed the lifelong nature of personal development. Gail Sheehy's *Passages* was a bestseller. Mezirow was interested in constructivists such as George Kelly and Robert Kegan and in the psychoanalytic approach of Roger Gould. The works of Houle on motivation and Tough on self-directed learning were also popular. The andragogy of Knowles was a major influence on the entire field. Mezirow considered this situation wanting, and undertook to reconstruct the understanding of adult learning. This changed the field of adult education (see Kasl, 2015).

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.

(Mezirow, 1991, p. xii)

In Mezirow's quest to understand meaning-making, he continued to value knowledge from multiple sources in creating a comprehensive theory of adult learning:

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 for interpreting the phenomenon. Few efforts have been made to develop a synthesis of the different theories that educators of adults can use.

(Mezirow, 1991, p. xi)

Mezirow (1994) was a vocal critic of competency-based education and instrumental learning that excluded communicative and critical (transformative) learning. He argued that the "behavioral change model of adult education has been indiscriminately applied to communicative learning and a cap placed on critical/transformational learning" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 17). This neglect of communicative and critical learning led Mezirow to a number of brief ventures into poetry including this "On instrumental learning":

Predictable, competent, computerized
Whirring unheard in measured achievement
Of programmed next steps
Outcomes anticipated calibrated
Premises intact
No doubts, debts, dreams.

(Mezirow, 1994, p. 8)

Mezirow borrowed substantially from Jürgen Habermas in order to create a critical theory of adult education and give rigour to his theory of learning. He borrowed:

- The knowledge-generating emancipatory cognitive interest that informed the emancipatory learning of transformation theory;
- Critical self-reflection modelled on the critical explorations of Freud's psychoanalysis and 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 and links with discursive democracy;
- Distorted communication, including colonization of the lifeworld, decoupling of lifeworld and system, as well as the demise of the public sphere, are the pathologies of capitalism.

Mezirow was unable to convincingly argue that transformative learning had an adequate understanding of the social dimension of learning partly because he did not take on board the full corpus of Habermas's critical theory whose work grounds critical reflection and discourse in interpersonal relationships. The precise elements of the work of Habermas that he actually ignored are precisely the elements that may have addressed some of the more persistent critiques of his work. The ways in which Mezirow *used* his theoretical base, how he utilized Habermas and others are worthy of further study and critique (see Eschenbacher, 2019).

In recent years, the global context in which we teach has changed. Authoritarianism threatens in many countries. The United States is at risk. Inequalities, misogyny, racism, neoliberalism are not just opportunities for learning but present an existential threat. If climate change and its challenge to our survival are included, there are agendas for transformative learning and education. This will test our resolve to make progress, and to see education as part of the solution. Transformative agendas will be tested in unimaginable ways. These issues must preoccupy transformative educators, our theory, and our practice as we keep one eye on the genesis of transformation theory and the other on present and future challenges.

This book reminds me of the poem "The rain stick" by the Irish poet and Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney. A rain stick is a hollow bamboo with grains of rice sealed inside. By moving the stick around the grains of rice fall about and mimic the sound of rain. Heaney recommends listening carefully and one might hear sounds one heard before – trickle, sprinkle, or downpour. Who cares if it is merely grains of rice falling through the bamboo stick?

Up-end the rain stick and what happens next
Is a music that you never would have known
To listen for
.... Listen now again.

(Heaney, 1998, p. 395)

This book achieves this. By listening to previously read authors some familiar and some new sounds are unexpectedly heard. There is the unfinished project of transformation theory. Hopefully, further studies will undertake this as an immanent critique. In this we remain, all of us, learners meeting at crossroads in Greece and elsewhere.

Note

- 1 Ted Fleming is Adjunct Associate Professor of Adult Education, at Columbia University, New York and External Academic Advisor to Larissa Learning City and Citizens' University – a UNESCO-funded project. He received the Jack Mezirow Theory of Transformative Learning Award for his 'original contribution to the theory of learning' writing on Axel Honneth.

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