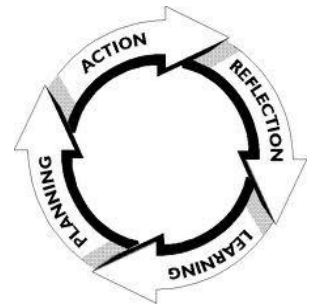


Transformative learning – what is it and how can I get it!

"In times of change *learners* inherit the earth; while the learned *find* themselves beautifully *equipped* to deal with a *world that no longer exists*." - Eric Hoffer

Learning is important for leaders. Effective leadership depends on the ability to see what is possible and then work with others to develop and achieve shared goals. It requires continuous reflection, inquiry and planning. This paper describes a theory for learning called transformative learning that offers processes to help gain personal insight and understanding on areas that might be unconsciously driving thoughts and actions.

Action learning is an excellent process to help learn from experiences. It has clear stages for reflecting on action, drawing out the insights and generalisations, and then putting the learning into a plan for future action. The focus is on learning from action and then planning new actions that will lead to improved outcomes.



Transformative learning focuses less on reflection on action and more on the reflection of assumptions, expectations and perspectives. Transformative learning often comes about when we are faced with a challenge, often triggering a strong emotional reaction. This is referred to as a disorienting dilemma as it leaves us wondering if we have the understanding and capacity to resolve the situation.

Definition of learning

Learning is commonly defined as the *acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being taught*.

In 1971, Jurgen Habermas, a German sociologist and philosopher defined Domains of Learning that have different purposes and logics. It is interesting to consider what we learn formally at schools and universities and what is learned from life experience.

- **Instrumental learning** – allows us to manipulate and control the environment, predict events and take appropriate actions. Knowledge is established by reference to external world of things that can be seen, heard, smelt, felt and tasted.
- **Communicative learning** – learning what others mean when they communicate with us. Involves feelings, intentions, values and moral issues.
- **Emancipatory learning** - this knowledge comes from questioning the other two types of knowledge – instrumental and communicative. It arises from a person's ability to be self-reflective and self-aware of personal beliefs within a social and cultural context.

Emancipatory learning is considered a transformational process as it describes the outcome of improved self-reflection and awareness. It is much more than taking in new skills and knowledge. It is about questioning the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs that have been acquired unconsciously while we were growing up and through the society we are living in.

Transformative learning

Transformational learning was developed as a theory in 1978 by Jack Mezirow, a sociologist from USA who conducted a study of women returning to college after a long period of time. A personal development program led to a *perspective transformation* as the women became aware of their beliefs and feelings about themselves and their role in society. The programs helped women to see they themselves as products of previously "unchallenged and

oppressive cultural expectations and prescribed sex roles.” They became more confident in taking on new roles and careers outside the traditional homemaking roles.

When children mature it is considered a “formative” process, where beliefs about themselves, others and the world are assimilated from family, community and society. Adulthood is therefore considered a “transformative” process because in becoming adults, there is a questioning and alienation of accepted roles and the development of new perspectives. Since the evidence from the women’s re-entry program, transformative learning has been further defined and developed.

Reflection

Reflection is a key process in transformative learning as it helps to examine “taken for granted assumptions, beliefs and perspectives.” We may not reflect on personal beliefs or assumptions or why we believe them, unless reflection is done regularly or more commonly, when we experience an event or situation. This is what Mezirow (1978) calls a “disorienting dilemma,” as it leads us to question our sense of self and challenges deeply held values. This dilemma requires critical thinking and reflection because the current thinking, which had served us well up to that point in time, is now found to be “distorted or otherwise invalid” and leaves us unable to cope with the current challenge. Learning new skills and knowledge is not enough to deal with complexity of what is happening. It requires a new perspective.

Examples of Habermas’ domains of learning are offered as questions in the table below which was developed by Patricia Cranton (2006) in the three areas of reflection – content, process and premise.

<i>Reflective questions</i>	<i>Knowledge</i>		
	Instrumental	Communicative	Emancipatory
Content	What are the facts?	What do others say about this issue?	What are my assumptions?
Process	How do I know this is true?	How did I integrate others' points of view?	How do I know my assumptions are valid?
Premise	Why is this knowledge important to me?	Why should I believe in this conclusion?	Why should I revise or not my perspective?

These questions could be useful at the reflection stage of the action learning cycle. It will help to achieve deep thinking and could lead to a different level of enquiry rather than just questions about what happened, what was said, how did I feel?

Mezirow (1991) believes that humans have an urgent need to understand the meaning of our experience and to integrate it with what we already know so we can plan for the future. He sees learning as much more than acquiring knowledge and skills. Mezirow (2000) has defined key concepts that help to understand transformative learning.

Frames of reference

Frames of reference are the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter our experiences. Our values and sense of self are anchored in our frames of reference.

Examples

- *Cultural paradigm* (collectively held frames of reference) – a person who was born on a cattle property in western Qld would have different expectations about clothes to wear, how to communicate with friends and family and the type of food they eat compared to a person born in a city in Saudi Arabia.
- *Personal perspective* – a person who was raised in a large family who regularly participated and attended local sporting events where the father was a handyman and the mother had a vegetable garden would become an adult where they are likely to live a similar lifestyle. This would be quite different to the lifestyle of a person who was an only child, whose parents were wealthy and the family travelled overseas extensively.

Frames of references have two dimensions, a habit of mind and resulting points of view.

Habits of mind

Habits of mind are a set of assumptions that filter the meaning of an experience. Some varieties of habits of mind are

- Psychological – how people see themselves
- Sociolinguistic – based on social norms and the way language is used
- Epistemic – to do with knowledge and how knowledge is acquired
- Moral-ethical – related to conscience and morality
- Philosophical – based on world view and religious doctrine
- Aesthetic – standards, attitudes and judgements about beauty

Habits of mind can include preferences for politics; respecting or challenging authority; problem solving; dealing with change; being with people – working alone or with others

Questions developed by Cranton (2006) in the table below relate to the six habits of mind.

<i>Reflective questions</i>	<i>Habits of Mind</i>		
	Psychological	Sociolinguistic	Epistemic
Content	What do I believe about myself?	What are the social norms?	What knowledge do I have?
Process	How have I come to have this perception of myself?	How have these social norms been influential?	How did I obtain this knowledge?
Premise	Why should I question this perception?	Why are these norms important?	Why do I need or not need this knowledge?
	Moral-ethical	Philosophical	Aesthetic
Content	What are my values?	What is my worldview?	What do I find beautiful?
Process	How have my values formed?	How have I come to hold this worldview?	How have my views of beauty been shaped?
Premise	Why are my values important?	Why do I stay with this worldview?	Why do I care about beauty?

- **Point of view** are the expression of habits of mind.

Example of a point of view as a result of a (psychological) habit of mind is if a person prefers to work alone may have a point of view that staff working on team projects and group problem solving are a waste of resources.

Example of a point of view as a result of (aesthetic) habit of mind where a person believes that performing arts is an important part of personal development will have a point of view that funding of arts is a priority.

Transformative learning happens when a frame of reference (including assumptions and expectations) is reviewed and found to be distorting, inauthentic or otherwise invalid (Cranton 2006).

Phases of perspective transformation

Mezirow has developed a sequence to describe the process that a person may experience in the process of transformational learning.

- Disorienting dilemma – loss of loved one, loss of job, end of relationship, moving to a different place (town, state, country), decline in health. This can be gradual or in a short period of time.
- Self-examination – fear, anger, guilt, shame
- Critical assessment of internal assumptions and feeling a sense of alienation from traditional social expectations
- Relating the discontent to the similar experience of others
- Exploring options for new roles, relationships and actions
- Planning new ways of action
- Acquiring new knowledge and skills
- Provisional trying of new roles
- Building competence and confidence for new roles
- Re-integrating into society with new perspectives

These activities indicate phases where a person has moments where their sense of meaning is clearer and helps develop an improved sense of self and a better understanding of their perspective on the world.

As we humans are social beings, the transformation of perspective is a social process. Other people may lead to the disorienting dilemma and/or provide alternative perspective. They also provide support for change by helping to reflect and analyse long held beliefs and the underlying assumptions.

Jung's psychological type and attitudes

Cranton (2006) believes Jung's model of psychological types (often expressed as Myers Briggs Type Indicator MBTI) is a powerful way of understanding how individuals have different attitudes (habits of mind) toward the world. It influences the type of dilemma that may be most disorienting for them. It also influences the level of reflection they are comfortable with.

Type reaction to disorienting dilemma

The process of transformative learning varies according to different psychological type.

Extraversion - People that prefer extraversion will more inclined to talk and work with other people and may have the point of view that working with groups is stimulating.

Introversion - Whereas a person that prefers introversion will have the attitude that working alone or with minimum level of distraction and interaction is more productive.

Intuition – A person with preference for intuition may see a disorienting dilemma as an opportunity and see possibilities for change.

Sensing – people with a preference for sensing is comfortable with routine and certainty so would be quite disturbed by unexpected change.

Feeling - People with a preference for the feeling function are more likely to be in tune with reactions and attitudes of others and more responsive to keeping a relationship so are willing to review their perspectives.

Thinking - While those with a preference for the thinking function are more likely to stick their principles in order to get through a disorienting dilemma.

Knowledge of psychological type preference will be an advantage for someone experiencing change as they will already have some insight into their likely reaction. Much is written on this body of work so finding out more information about strengths and weaknesses will help a person understand their likely reactions and suitable strategies.

Summary

The theory and concepts of transformative learning are useful in developing a deeper understanding of learning as a process and reinforces the importance of critical reflection. Learning of knowledge and skills is usually done as a choice to improve outcomes. There are other times when we “have” to learn to cope with unexpected things happen or when we have no choice. When we experience a disorienting dilemma, we can choose to continue with our current thinking or can critically reflect on our habits of mind and perspectives with a view to developing new skills, knowledge, attitudes and roles to manage for the future.

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