Transformative Learning: Mutinous Thoughts Revisited

Michael Newman[1]

Abstract

The author finds himself rereading an article he wrote several years ago, in which he questioned transformative learning. He recalls some of his reasons for writing the article, and considers his present position. He reflects on the understanding of consciousness that underlies much of the literature on transformative learning, and compares it with his own understanding. He ends by speculating on the purpose of adult education.

In late 2013, Randee Lawrence sent me comments by students from a class she teaches at Yorkville University. They had read an article of mine entitled "Calling Transformative Learning Into Question: Some Mutinous Thoughts." The article was published in the *Adult Education Quarterly* in 2012, but I had written it in early 2009, so it was already nearly 5 years old. In order to reply to Randee's students, I reread the article, and tried to sort out in my own mind why I had written it, and whether I still subscribed to those reasons.

What follows is the result of these reflections. I will necessarily make generalizations to which you will be able to provide exceptions, and I am likely to express opinions that some may find unsustainable and even disagreeable. So disagree away and, if the spirit moves you, let me know where I have gone wrong.

[1]Paddington, New South Wales, Australia

Corresponding Author:
Michael Newman, 5 Olive Street, Paddington, New South Wales 2021, Australia.
Email: msnewman@ausnet.com.au

Dominant Discourse

By 2009, transformative learning theory had become the dominant discourse in the academic world of adult education, and although things may have quietened down in the last couple of years, it still remains so. There is an established conference devoted to transformative learning. There is a journal concerned exclusively with transformative education. And a large number of conference papers, articles, and books on transformative learning, including a massive handbook (Taylor, Cranton, & Associates, 2012), have been published over the past 15 years. To get an impression of how many conference papers, articles, and books, see Taylor and Snyder (2012).

I still see no justification for this dominance. Other theories offer insight into the mysterious phenomenon of learning: Carl Rogers's humanism; Robert Gagne's behaviorism; Paulo Freire's popular education; Mechthild Hart's political economy; Michael Welton's critical theory; Laurent Daloz's developmental education; Paula Allman's Marxism; Peter Mayo's interpretation of Gramsci; and David Boud's experiential learning.

There is no good reason for any of these to take second place to what is just another theory.

Contradictory Discourse

There remains an unresolved inconsistency in the literature. Transformative learning is being cast as both special and universal. Some claim that transformative learning is different from, and more significant than, other kinds of learning (Mezirow, 1991; O'Sullivan, 2012), while others claim that transformative learning theory has replaced andragogy as the major philosophy in the field of adult education (Taylor, 2007; Taylor et al., 2012). It is a bit like having your cake and eating it.

Inappropriate Learning

Transformative learning still strikes me as inappropriate for the vast amount of learning we do in the practical world. What relevance would it have for a driver learning how to connect a hose from a tanker to a Boeing 787? Give me competency-based learning for something like that every time. Transformative learning involves self-analysis, and in much instrumental learning there is neither the time nor the need for introspection. No one wants to be standing around on the tarmac, ankle deep in aviation fuel, talking about psycho-cultural assumptions.

Psychology of the Self

I had disliked the way the literature on transformative learning theory focused on the psychology of the self. In his earlier writing Jack Mezirow (1981) acknowledged the role of culture by including it in his phrase *psycho-cultural assumptions*, but I felt that any discussion of the cultural context in the literature took a back seat to the psychological. Learners might be encouraged to examine how their assumptions derived from their psychological biographies and from the culture in which they lived, but the final

stage of the learning process was deemed to be a reintegration into that same culture. The learner's psychological make-up may have been analyzed and altered, but the culture in which the learner lived had not.

During the 2000s things changed. Increasingly, commentators wrote about transformative learning in community, social, and political contexts, and looked for ways of bringing planetary concerns, spirituality, and a range of sociocultural issues together to form a unified theory. Olen Gunnlaugson (2008) describes these developments as a second wave of transformative learning theory, but I see them as the kinds of extension and elaboration that go on in any theory making.

Whether they constitute a second wave or an elaboration of the first, I believe these developments have had little impact and that most adult education practitioners and theorists continue to see transformative learning as an individual experience. Mezirow (2012) acknowledges these "second wave" developments in his recent writing, but he still feels able to cite his 10 phases of transformative learning, which are expressed in terms of an individual learner's progress, and he can still write:

> In fostering transformative learning efforts, what counts is what the individual wants to learn. (Mezirow, 2012, p. 93)

For all the talk of broadening the discussion and practice of transformative learning, Mezirow's individualistic vision reigns supreme. Trawl through the proceedings of the 2012 International Transformative Learning Conference, or look at *Mezirow* in the name-index of Taylor et al. (2012), and tell me I am wrong.

This concentration on the individual learner has been a problem from the very start. I acknowledge that we are trapped inside our own awareness, and so, in a metaphysical sense, are utterly alone. But we spend our lives reaching out to touch, to caress, to speak to, and to be with others. We need physical and intellectual contact with the people and the world around us, no matter how imperfect that contact may be. True hermits are a rarity, and for the vast majority of us, a full and rewarding life is to be found in the company of others.

Reflection Diminished

This focus on the self can be seen in another aspect of the literature. The phrases *self-reflection* and *critical self-reflection* have become current and are sometimes used interchangeably with *reflection*. Again, the proceedings of recent transformative learning conferences confirm this. The act of pondering on anything and everything gives way to thinking about the self. An open, generous mental activity that contributes to the fullness of our lives becomes a narrow concern with me, my, and mine.

An Indulgence

I had felt that a lot of the transformative learning described in the literature was an activity for the privileged, an indulgence that the majority of people in the world who are struggling to earn a crust, feed a family, or just survive would find little time for.

And I am afraid I still do. Of course, if we draw Paulo Freire into the fold, as Juanita Johnson-Bailey (2012) does, we can argue that his *conscientization* has affinities with transformative learning and that it is aimed at the poor and the dispossessed. But there is a major divide between the two concepts. *Conscientization* is about mobilizing learners to struggle against oppressive forces, and it encourages them to examine the ways those forces have worked on them. The learners are not to blame. The oppressors are.

Transformative learning, as it is described in the literature, has a confessional element that is absent from *conscientization*. The learner is encouraged to go in search of her or his false assumptions, and then go through the cathartic experience of owning up to them.

Spirituality and Religion

I had disliked the pseudo-religious tone of some of the transformative learning literature, although I was not surprised by its presence. For those with a religious belief, particularly of the evangelical kind, I imagine the word *transformation* carries similar meanings to the word *conversion*. And again I imagine that some people would interpret a person finding a god as both a transformation and an act of learning.

Certainly, some writers have no qualms about discussing transformative learning in the context of a spiritual quest (see, e.g., English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2002; Vella, 2000). But I sense a latent religiosity in the literature as a whole. In my article, I had listed a number of personal testimonies by students, which Kathleen King (2009, p. 4) cited as examples of perspective transformation, and I repeat them here:

> I see things really differently now.
> I am much more open-minded to views other than mine.
> I never understood what my career really meant.
> I have had such a radical change in my view of issues.
> I have more self-confidence than I ever dreamed possible.

The cynic in me hears echoes in each of these testimonials of the reformed sinner's cry: "I was lost, but now I am found!"

A significant number of papers in recent International Transformative Learning Conferences have dealt with spirituality, and I regard this as an aberration. I remain convinced that religious belief and spirituality have no place in education because neither can be taught or learnt. I acknowledge that religious belief and spirituality are different, but both are dependent on faith, and the certainty of the faithful is out of place in a context that celebrates the restless curiosity of the learner.

Discussion

Mezirow (2009, 2012), particularly, talks of rational discourse as an important element in the process of transformative learning. But his is a "soft" version of discourse, involving empathy, trust, and the like. I had wanted a "hard" version, and I still do.

Paula Allman (2001) makes the distinction between conventional discussion and dialogue. Conventional discussion, she maintains, is a sharing of monologues. Everyone is given a say, and there is often a chairperson to see that this happens. In discussion we move from statement to statement. Statements can lock us into the present, and discourage speculation. There may be debates, but all these do is enable each member of the group to clarify, test, and defend what she or he already thinks.

In contrast, dialogue is a form of collective, and generative, inquiry. The group focuses on an object of thought, examining it and their reactions and relationships to it. An individual's point of view is valuable if it extends the group's understanding of the object of thought. In dialogue we move from question to question. An answer is valuable only in so far as it leads to a more interesting question. By looking for ever more interesting questions, we open ourselves to new understandings. Freire (1972) calls this form of enquiry *problematizing*.

Arcane Examples

Some writers draw their examples of what they see as transformative learning from their experience as academic adult educators educating adult educators about adult education. It seems a bit like a novelist writing a novel about a novelist writing a novel. In my article, I had taken a perverse pleasure in choosing examples with body odor, blood, and muck in them, like learning to play poker, bathe a new born baby, and strip and reassemble an irrigation pump. It was my "subliminal" attempt to show up the arcane nature of some of the examples in the literature.

Too Earnest

I had found most writing on transformative learning too earnest. And I still do. If the outcomes are meant to be new and exciting understandings of the self and the world, then I want the delight of discovery to be described. I want descriptions of the kind of satisfaction you can see in a novice scuba diver after her first real dive, as she walks up the beach, pulls off her head gear, shakes out her hair, and grins with unalloyed joy.

Too Much

Sometimes the role accorded to transformative learning is simply too big. O'Sullivan (2012) describes his "specific formulation of transformative learning" in the following way:

> Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (p. 164)

An old man in an Irish play, whose author and title I have long forgotten, cries out in dismay: "They tell me there's an aeroplane that goes at a thousand miles an hour. Now that's too fast!" I have something of the same reaction to O'Sullivan's "formulation." Now that's too much. No form of learning can do all that.

I need to be careful here. I admire O'Sullivan's breadth of vision and his passion, but I cannot accept his list as a description of a particular kind of learning. Some items on his list will be achieved by reflection; others by good old-fashioned information gathering; others by reading, talking, and listening; and still others by political action. All these activities will involve learning, and some of that learning may be profound, but there is no need, as O'Sullivan does, to invoke the terms *deep transformation, transformative learning*, and *integral transformative learning*. Nothing is lost if I go back to O'Sullivan's quote above, and drop the adjective *transformative*, or replace it with the word *good*. The introduction might now make reference to his "specific formulation of learning," and the opening sentence of the passage might read: "Good learning involves a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions." I would also remove some of the hyperbole—the words *deep* and *basic* in the sentence directly above, for example.

Try dropping the word *transformative*, or replacing it with the word *good*, in other texts on transformative learning, and see how little effect on the meaning the changes have.

An Extravagant Claim

It is difficult for O'Sullivan not to exaggerate because the central claim in the literature on transformative learning—that a person can be changed completely, transmogrified, metamorphosed—is already too extravagant. The word raises false hopes. Yes, we can learn and we can change, but we cannot cease being ourselves and become someone else.

The problem lies with the word *transformation* itself. It allows for no half-measures. There are no increments or degrees of transformation—we cannot be a little transformed—and this leads us into linguistic and logical traps. For example, in his definition Mezirow talks of "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference . . . to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). If we talk of making a person (or their frames of reference) *more* open, we imply that she or he is already open, but less than we would like. But we cannot claim that a move from being less open to being more open is a transformation, since it is simply an adjustment in the degree of the person's openness. For a person's openness to be the result of a transformation, the starting point would have to be the absolute opposite to, or total absence of, openness.

But here lies madness, and the best response to a conundrum like this is to abandon the word altogether, and then the false hopes and the illogicalities cease to exist.

Good Teaching and Good Learning

In my article, I had talked of Jane Thompson's work in the 1980s with English working-class women in a program called "Second Chance for Women." Thompson taught her

learners the skills of critical analysis, synthesis, communication, and debate. She initiated them into the academic disciplines of sociology, history, and political economy. She taught them research skills. And she shared her feminist vision. Thompson's aims were radical. She encouraged her learners to challenge the patriarchal nature of conventional academic disciplines, but she used conventional academic practice to do so.

By contrast, accounts of transformative learning, as they appear in Mezirow, Taylor, and Associates (2009), Taylor et al. (2012), and International Transformative Learning Conference proceedings, seem to have more in common with accounts of self-development and personal growth programs. The educators make the process democratic and give everyone equal space and time. They encourage self-examination and self-revelation. And they use experiential learning methods, which cast them in the role of facilitators, and limit, or divest them of, their responsibility as teachers.

Read through the texts cited above and you will see the educator redefined as mentor, coach, guide, assistant, someone who fosters learning, learner, teacher-learner, helper, manager, and collaborator. These designations have their place, but I like the way Thompson retained her authority, and I have no hesitation in describing her as a good *teacher*, and the learning done by the women she worked with as good learning. If you have not already done so, read Thompson's *Learning Liberation: Women's Response to Men's Education* (1983), and you will understand why I say this.

Thompson had an agenda, and that was to equip her learners with the skills, knowledge and theory to take control of their lives and to defy any and everyone who might want to put them down because they were women. She drew on her learners' personal experiences, as many good teachers do, and helped each individual affirm her identity, but the course was packed with content. Thompson understood that theory and practice are built on knowledge.

In My More Cynical Moments …

I cannot help wondering whether some of the people writing about transformative learning applied the theory when they were planning and conducting their programs, or whether they turned to the theory some time later, once they had decided to write for publication. Now they would need to select an interesting moment in the program, claim it as an example of transformative learning, go to the theory to find suitable arguments to bolster their claim, and if they were submitting their paper to the International Transformative Learning Conference, put the word *transformative* in the title. Of course, you and I, dear reader, would never do that.

Behind my flippancy is a serious question. Can transformative learning theory be applied in educational practice, or is it a construct we can only use to explain certain educational phenomena *after the event*?

The Self and Consciousness

In my article I had touched on consciousness, and I want to end these further thoughts by revisiting the subject.

A strain of secular humanism, often unstated, has been present in adult education discourse for a good number of years, most forcefully since the publication of Carl Rogers's *Freedom to Learn* (1969), then in Rogers's influence on Malcolm Knowles thinking and writing, and then in the work of Jack Mezirow. We can see the humanist belief that people are inherently good in Mezirow's depiction of rational discourse constructed on trust, solidarity, and empathy, and we can see the humanist "urge towards self-actualisation" (Elias & Merriam, 2004) in the idea of transformative learning itself.

This humanist influence in the literature of transformative learning results in a concept of the self that I find hard to accept. We are born with our human nature already in place, so the story seems to go, and it is from this inherited human nature that we draw both our individual consciousness and our sense of commonality with others. At birth our human nature is necessarily pure, but it becomes sullied by the clutter of experiences that make up our lives, and that bring false and ill-formed assumptions with them. Transformative learning, the story continues, is the process of looking within ourselves, clearing up the clutter, and revising the assumptions, so that our nature regains some of its former purity.

As I have said above, there is an association with a confessional form of therapy in some of the adult education discourse. And this association is alive and well in transformative learning theory, lodged in the implication that our assumptions need to be transformed because they have become pathological, and are rendering our thinking and behavior dysfunctional.

I subscribe to a different concept of consciousness. Arthur Schopenhauer (Yalom, 2005) says that we have passed through an eternity of nonbeing before we are born, from which I conclude that we bring nothing into life but a capacity to exist. Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/1984) says we exist first, encounter ourselves as we surge up into life, and define ourselves afterwards, from which I conclude that it is we who give ourselves a sense of self. And Marx and Engels (1846/1998) argue that we develop our consciousness through the encounter of the self with the social and material world.

To understand consciousness we do not examine the self. We do not examine the social and material worlds. We examine *the encounter* between the self and the social and material worlds. Consciousness is a relationship. There is more. Encounters do not exist in a vacuum. They are mediated by all manner of context, phenomenon, and circumstance. Freire (1972, p. 61) argues that we construct ourselves "in word, in work, in action-reflection." So we can say that our consciousness, that is, the encounter between our self and the world, is mediated by language, by work in the form of our engagement with the social and material world, and by the process of reflecting on that engagement. Freire uses the Marxian term *praxis* for this process of action-reflection. He uses the word *conscientization* for the authentic consciousness that results from *praxis*.

If we are to help people learn, then, we do not encourage them to go in search of their faults, and engage in a lonely reordering of their assumptions. We help them engage with the social and material world, and constantly reflect on that engagement. We understand consciousness in terms of action, and action in terms of endlessly making choices: to eat now or later, to stop reading (!), to marry this person, to take up that

job, to form this organization, to live or to die. We can see consciousness as a continual expression of will.

And there is more. The existentialists tell us that nothing has any inherent value. Things, people, ideas, even our lives, take on value because we choose them. We can understand consciousness, therefore, as a continual expression of will, and a continual allocation of value.

And more. By allocating value we give things, people, ideas, and our lives a meaning. We can understand consciousness, therefore, as a continual expression of will, a continual allocation of value, and a continual making of meaning.

Writers on transformative learning theory envisage action, but it is usually presented as an outcome of transformative learning, and is relegated to the end phase of the process, when we act on our new understandings. I see action and learning as inseparable. Action is the generative force for learning. It is the context in which learning takes place. And it is the outcome of learning.

The Aim of Adult Education

Do we look inwards, or do we reach out? Do we see education as therapy, or education as action? Do we focus on our faults, or build on our strengths? Do we examine the old as it is manifested in a number of supposedly dysfunctional assumptions or out-of-shape frames of reference, or do we create the new in the form of a heightened consciousness?

Schopenhauer says that death is the annihilation of the self, from which I conclude that all we have is this one life. And I do not want to waste it in a fastidious examination of the self. It seems far more sensible for each and every one of us to engage with our social and material worlds, and to go on creating our consciousnesses. In the process we will surely change, and some of us may even claim to be transformed. But that is not the aim.

Life is an accidental and exciting opportunity to make meaning, and the aim of good adult education is to help both learners and teachers take full advantage of that opportunity.

Postscript

And isn't Jack Mezirow saying the same thing? He opens his chapter in Taylor et al. (2012) with the sentence:

> A defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know to avoid the threat of chaos. (p. 73)

Having attacked a theory so closely associated with Mezirow, I am pleased to find myself ending these further thoughts in accord with him—learning is about making meaning—although Mezirow says it with more gravitas than I do.

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Author Biography

Michael Newman is retired but continues to write (and occasionally speak) about adult education. He is Australian and lives in Sydney. You can access some of his books free of charge on his website at www.michaelnewman.info.