Mezirow and Transformation Theory

Introduction

This chapter presents Mezirow's Transformation Theory[1] and a series of critiques supported by the published literature. Transformation Theory is a model of adult learning developed and first presented by Mezirow in 1978 in collaboration with Marsick.

I firstly summarise Mezirow's Transformation Theory of adult learning. I follow this summary with a presentation of the main published criticisms of Mezirow's theory. I have grouped the criticisms into the following categories: the apparent cohesion of a weakly linked model; the proposition that the model operates as a metaphor rather than a theory; substantive inadequacies of the model; and less substantive issues drawn from the literature.

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1 *Transformation Theory* is the theory of how transformative learning occurs, what transformative learning is and how it is best developed in adults. Within Transformation Theory there are a number of terms used synonymously for learning that transforms a person's meaning perspective; viz. *transformative learning, transformation learning* and *transformational learning*. Often the term *transformative learning* and *transformative learning theory* are used synonymously for Transformation Theory. A *transformation* refers to a non-reversible shift in a person's meaning perspective towards greater inclusiveness, discrimination, openness or permeability (to other ideas), flexibility, reflexiveness and autonomy. A *meaning perspective* is a basic belief or assumption a person holds about how the world works (Mezirow, 1978, 1991a, 2000). In this paper, *transformative learning* or *transformative learning theory* is used generally where the term *transformation theory* is not required. This language usage is critiqued later in the Chapter.

Mezirow from Dissertation

Transformation Theory in brief

Beginnings

Mezirow stated that he based his Transformation Theory on extensive grounded research that he had undertaken. In 1978 he presented the theory in a paper titled: "Education for perspective transformation. Women's re-entry programs in Community Colleges", written in collaboration with Victoria Marsick. It was also presented in the journal *Adult Education Quarterly* simply titled "Perspective transformation "(Marsick & Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow has since developed, refined, clarified and extended aspects of Transformation Theory. He has based these modifications to the theory variously on others' applications of the model in research; discussions and dialogues with peers at conferences; arguments and expositions with peers in journals; and peer responses to his own books on the subject. There are now regular conferences, published journals and gatherings that hold Transformation Theory as their prime focus (Mezirow, 2000, 2009).

This chapter begins with a presentation of Mezirow's description a transformation, what it means, and what actually gets transformed. The chapter then presents Mezirow's idea of domains of learning with regard to transformative learning. Different types of transformational shifts are then described, followed by a clarification of what Mezirow apparently means by 'learning'. Different key elements of the process of transformative learning are then presented. Finally, the ten steps Mezirow has described as being key parts of a transformative process are set out and explicated.

Enlarging the Worldview

According to Mezirow, transformative learning is learning that occurs when an adult engages in activities that cause or allow them to see a different worldview from their own. For the learning to be transformative, in Mezirow's theory, adults then work to integrate the implications of that different worldview into their own worldview, thereby enlarging it. This change to a person's worldview and the enlarging of it is

Mezirow from Dissertation

what Mezirow calls transformative. The ranges of activities that could cause or allow a person to see a worldview different from their own and to integrate the different worldview into their own are numerous and can be culturally specific or a-cultural. The transformation may be small or it may be large and may have a small or large impact on an adult learner's life, either initially or over time.

Seeing the World Differently

Mezirow describes transformative learning as a particular type of adult learning (Mezirow 1978, 1991a, 2000). He describes this learning as a process of an adult modifying or adjusting narrow, problematic, fixed, or static assumptions and expectations in themselves. He describes these assumptions and expectations in adults as part of a 'frame of reference' or 'meaning perspective' through which we filter our incoming sense impressions of the world. The meaning perspective 'selectively shapes and delimits perception, cognition, feelings and disposition by predisposing our intentions, expectations, and purposes. It provides the context for making meaning within which we choose what and how a sensory experience is to be construed and/or appropriated' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16). Mezirow states that a transformation in a meaning perspective means that a person views their world differently and this includes viewing themselves differently.

Mezirow stated that his idea of a transformation of a meaning perspective is partially derived from Kuhn's idea of a 'paradigm shift.' A paradigm is a set of concepts, beliefs, methods of enquiry and values that are held by a particular scientific discipline, which tend towards forms of inquiry and research that reinforce these same concepts, beliefs and values (Kuhn, 1970). Kuhn coined the term paradigm shift to indicate when a whole new set of concepts or beliefs began to take over from the pre-existing set, for a given discipline.

Mezirow stated that it was this idea of a paradigm shift that was formative for him as he developed his Transformation Theory (Mezirow, 1991, p. XIII). Mezirow describes a *paradigm* as a collectively held meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1990, p. 46). He writes that Transformation Theory is applying the idea of a paradigm shift to an individual. That is, a transformation of a paradigm has equivalences with a

Mezirow from Dissertation

3

perspective transformation. Thus, transformative learning may arguably be seen as a 'paradigm shift' for an individual, rather than a community. Mezirow proposes that an individual who experiences transformative learning would have a 'shift' in his or her meaning perspective. The shift is away from narrow, problematic, fixed, or static meaning perspectives and towards more inclusive, discriminating, open or permeable (to different ideas), flexible, holistic, reflective or examinable and autonomous meaning perspectives. Transformative learning, according to this theory, is thus seen as a non-reversible directional change that gets ratcheted up as it progresses.

Mezirow describes himself as unashamedly in the camp of the Emancipationists and part of the Enlightenment[2] tradition (Mezirow, 2000). He argues that a transformative learning shift always leads an individual towards improved psychological health and as a consequence this flows on to the community generally through improved social and cultural outcomes derived from individual actions.

Shifting Meaning Making Structures

Mezirow has developed a theoretical map of adult meaning making structures (Mezirow, 1991a). In this map he describes two structures called 'meaning schemas' and 'meaning perspectives'. A meaning schema is a belief or basic idea a person might have about how something ought to work or does work. A meaning schema, according to Mezirow, could be about how to do something, how to understand something, someone or a group, or how to understand oneself. This could be a belief, for example, about how an engine may work, what constitutes what a 'family' is, community rules of engagement, norms of how people interact, or about physics or music. The transformation of a meaning schema could be, for example, discovering that not all families work in the same way or experiencing places where

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2 The Enlightenment tradition is used here to refer to the advocacy and support for a rational approach to argument, discourse and discussion as the superior way of intellectual operation and essential for progress, as well as a belief in the improvability of man and woman through this use of rationality, science and education.

Mezirow from Dissertation

there are different norms of interaction, such as other countries and cultures. When this discovery or experience occurs, Mezirow says that the meaning schema a person has of how a family works might be transformed or how a culture should operate could broaden.

A meaning perspective is a more fundamental belief than a meaning schema and is the 'structure of assumptions within which one's past experience assimilates and transforms new experience' (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 42). Beliefs might include, for example, a notion of a person's legitimate role is in the world, or a belief about the importance of family, or a belief in a person's identity. These are all meaning perspectives. Thus, transforming a meaning perspective is not an everyday event and may actually be very rare.

On the other hand, and depending on circumstances, transforming a meaning schema will tend to be a less uncommon event than transforming a meaning perspective. Meaning perspectives in Mezirow's theory are equivalent to 'personal constructs', 'perceptual filters', 'conceptual maps', 'personal ideologies', and 'habits of expectation' or 'ideas about how the world works' (Mezirow, 1991a). More recently, Mezirow has been using other equivalent terms for meaning perspectives that are more recognisable to lay or non-academic people such as a 'habit of mind', a 'perspective', a 'concept', an 'attitude', an 'outlook', a 'way of thinking', a 'strongly held group of opinions or beliefs', a 'deeply held value', an 'identity', a 'worldview' and a 'point of view' (Mezirow, 2000).

Transformation of a meaning perspective has a profound impact on an individual's life. It changes the way an individual sees himself or herself and it changes the way they continue to learn and construe new meanings about the world (Mezirow, 1991a). The impact of the transformation can come from the ongoing and expanding divergence between how a person used to think and act and were seen by those around them, and how they now think and act and are seen by those around them, following the transformation. This can have consequences on whether or not a person continues with the transformative learning process, if the divergence gets too severe, or impacts on their larger life.

Mezirow from Dissertation

Domains of Learning

Mezirow describes transformations in meaning perspectives as occurring in either the 'instrumental domain' or the 'communicative domain'. The idea of 'domains of learning' is an idea borrowed and expanded from Habermas (1971).

Mezirow describes the instrumental domain as involving an understanding of "how things work". This includes an understanding of such areas as: how to manipulate the environment (including people), engineering, adult learning and training, trades, management skills, and other technical areas. The instrumental learning domain relates to learning about cause-effect relationships and problem solving. Meaning in this domain is created deductively through experimenting with the environment to become more effective in controlling it in a given problem arena.

Mezirow declares that a transformation can also occur in the communicative domain. The communicative domain involves the relationships between people; how people communicate together; how people present themselves; and generally how beliefs and practices of human communication occur. The communicative domain includes "understanding, describing and explaining intentions; values; ideals; moral issues; political, philosophical, psychological, or educational concepts; feelings and reasoning" (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 75). The communicative domain is where people learn about cultural and social group norms of behaviour and thought. It is where meaning is created through abductive reasoning, which Mezirow describes as the process of using our own experience to understand another's, and where each step in the logic chain suggests the next step (Mezirow, 1991a).

Initially, Mezirow also recognised the 'emancipatory domain' as a domain of learning. Mezirow described the emancipatory domain as one where a person becomes critically reflective on his or her own assumptions. He stated that the emancipatory domain was where transformative learning took place. Since then, Mezirow has depicted the 'process of transformation' as occurring in both the instrumental and communicative domains and he no longer works conceptually with

the idea of an emancipatory domain (Mezirow, 2000).

Types of Transformations

Mezirow has stated that there are two types of transformation in meaning perspective. He calls them 'epochal' transformations and 'incremental' transformations (Mezirow, 1978, 1991a). An epochal transformation is said to occur when a learner's meaning perspective shifts very quickly, over perhaps minutes or days. A common example would be when someone feels a sense of "Eureka" or "Ah Ha!" about an area of study or research or life. The shift in meaning perspective comes quickly and the difference is immediately obvious to the learner involved. With the epochal transformation, the transformation of a meaning perspective is directly experienced. Insight is a term familiar to many, and an epochal transformation would be comparable with a very deep insight because it is a conscious experience of a transformation from one state of not knowing to another state of knowing.

An incremental transformation, on the other hand, is the result of small shifts in meaning schema that, over time, perhaps over months or years, lead a learner to slowly realise that a meaning perspective has shifted. With incremental transformation there is a dawning awareness that a meaning perspective has changed, rather than a direct experience of the change. This is a kind of kind of retrospective remembering, for example, a person remembering that they had a belief that they could never finish anything successfully, finding they have completed a university degree. Both incremental and epochal transformations assume there is a conscious appreciation of a shift in meaning perspective in order to be called transformative.

Types of Learning

Mezirow defines learning as "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996 p49). Applying this definition to the domains of learning and the meaning structures mentioned earlier, there are four distinct types

Mezirow from Dissertation

of learning (Mezirow, 1991a). Firstly, there is the learning that occurs within a meaning schema such as extending an ability to use mathematics, or to problem-solve. This learning is in the instrumental domain. Secondly, there is the learning that occurs when a new meaning schema is created, such as a new schema that a student might learn in a university. This learning could be in either of the domains of learning, either the instrumental domain or the communicative domain. Thirdly, there is the learning that occurs when the outcome is a transformation of a meaning schema. This is learning that occurs through reflection on content or the processes of determining action ('action' here describing problem-solving, the way communication occurs, as well as a type of action in the world). This also could be in either the instrumental or the communicative domain. Fourthly, there is the learning that results from a transformation of a meaning perspective. This results from reflection on underlying beliefs and assumptions. This type of learning is most likely to be in the communicative domain. Clearly, the first two forms of learning refer to what might be called 'regular' learning and the latter two forms of learning are transformative learning.

Key Elements of Transformative Learning

According to Mezirow, the following elements of 'disorienting dilemmas', 'critical reflection' and 'rational discourse' are key to bringing about transformative learning. He asserts that the application or experiencing of one of these elements, all of these elements, or a combination of them, may lead to transformative learning. It is important to note that a person can utilise all these elements and not necessarily experience transformative learning. Transformative learning may occur through a wholly linear process or it may be stepwise or indeed it may be disjointed (Coffman, quoted in Taylor, 1997). The path to a transformative learning experience is "individualistic, fluid and recursive" (Taylor, 2000, p. 292). It is clear that Mezirow's 'transformation' in Transformation Theory is in many ways a post-hoc description of a number of elements that show a recognisable pattern which has led to a consciously understood, permanent and integrated positive directional shift in a person's meaning perspective.

Mezirow from Dissertation

Disorienting dilemma. Mezirow refers to a disorienting dilemma as being one type of significant stimulus that leads many people to undergo a meaning perspective transformation. A disorienting dilemma is a dilemma that causes a significant level of disruption or disturbance in a person. A disorienting dilemma could be as extreme as the death of a spouse or child, a life-threatening illness, a divorce or job loss. It could be a more modest dilemma such as engaging in a professional development program, attending a university, a new career, or reading a particularly disturbing book.

One result of this disorienting dilemma is that the disoriented person is led to examine and reflect on why he or she is doing what they are doing in their lives. The disoriented person may also examine the beliefs and implicit or tacit assumptions underlying their own beliefs and subsequent actions, a process which Mezirow calls critical reflection. When the disoriented person does this with others it brings in the third element of rational discourse. Mezirow suggests in his writing that this self-examination through critical reflection and rational discourse might not occur without the disorienting dilemma taking place (Mezirow, 1991a).

Critical Reflection: Mezirow describes critical reflection as being important in his theory. It is the process whereby a person intentionally construes new meanings through critically examining his or her own beliefs or a set of beliefs. Mezirow presents critical reflection as a process that can occur in many ways and through many agencies. Critical reflection includes identifying embedded assumptions as well as considering these assumptions in an objective and rational manner through conscious reflection. Mezirow describes three main frames for critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991a, 2000). The first frame for critical reflection is content reflection, which is reflection on what happens, how it happens or on the data available about an area of concern. For instance, in assessing someone's leadership, we would reflect on the data available on the types of leadership they have exhibited.

The second frame for critical reflection is process reflection, which is reflection on whether the content available is sufficient, whether the interpretation of the data is adequate and whether the strategy for collecting and judging the data was adequate. For instance, in assessing someone's leadership, we might also reflect on

whether we have enough data, from whom it came, how it was collected and other interpretations of the data.

The third frame for critical reflection is premise reflection, which is reflection on underlying premises, beliefs and assumptions, and includes why the area of concern is being focused on. For instance, while assessing someone's leadership, we might also reflect on the premises that led us to believe that leadership is a good criterion to use for judging them, or whether judging is valuable at all, or even whether we are good judges. Mezirow states that he considers the focus on premise reflection as the most crucial in bringing about a transformative shift in a meaning perspective.

On several occasions, Mezirow has highlighted the point that critical reflection has a number of subordinate elements that all need to be in place for it to occur (Mezirow, 1991a, 1998). Their order is not essential but their presence is. The first element is the possession of means to illuminate underlying belief structures. This can be done through individual processes and efforts or with other people. The second element is detachment from beliefs in order to be objective and dispassionate enough about what is being reflected upon. The detachment can allow people to relax their self-protective responses and make them more likely to be open to new ideas and points of view. The third element is perseverance in the face of ambiguity, restlessness, awkwardness, agitation or surprise in order to see what develops or emerges from the reflective process. The fourth element is the ability to think through what is being uncovered in a rational-enough manner, so that obvious incongruencies are highlighted and examined rather than avoided or overlooked.

Rational Discourse: Mezirow (1991a) emphasised in his writing that the ability to engage in rational discourse is crucial. Rational discourse is a way of discussing with other people, in a logical and objective manner, personally- and socially-held beliefs and assumptions. Moreover, it implies doing it in a manner that will highlight incongruencies, biases or blind spots. Rational discussion, rational or deep dialogue with colleagues or friends, logical debates with friends, peer dialogues, and teacher/supervisor discussions are all different types of possible rational discourses.

Rational discourse can assist perspective transformation and can bolster and integrate an already modified meaning perspective (Mezirow, 2003). Mezirow writes

Mezirow from Dissertation

that he has been persuaded that the ideas of "rational enough" discussions are a realistic substitute for "truly" rational discussions (Mezirow, 2000). He discusses the ideal conditions for rational discourse while at the same time making it clear that they constitute an unattainable principle (Mezirow, 2000). He claims the ideal conditions include the main protagonists having accurate and complete information, being free from external coercion and distorting self-deception, and being open to alternative points of view. Additionally, they must be able to empathise and be concerned about how others think and feel, and be being able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively. The protagonists require an awareness of the context of ideas and, more importantly, an ability to reflect on underlying assumptions, including their own; As well, there needs to be equal opportunity to participate in various roles during a discourse, and a willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgement (Mezirow, 2000, p. 13).

The Transformative Process

Mezirow reports that, when he examined his original data, he noticed a number of patterns of activities or behaviour that the participants in his study typically went through and reported on. From this, he writes, that he developed a description of a number of the steps that are involved in the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1978). Broadly, these steps describe the process of a person being engaged in activities that may lead them to a shift in a meaning perspective; the effects of the shifting process; grappling with the consequent learning pressures and, finally, engaging with others to work through the struggle to integrate the new meaning perspective with their other existing meaning perspectives and larger life.

Mezirow claimed that his research participants described these steps as being important. The steps illustrate the type of development that learners went through, even though the steps were enacted in highly individual ways. These steps in different ways and in different orders assisted learners to integrate, develop and make sense of the shifted meaning perspective that they had developed. He has extensively and effectively compared these steps with other psychological learning

Mezirow from Dissertation

theories in his early work "Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning" (1991a).

In his recent collaborations titled "Learning as Transformation" and "Transformative Learning in Practic*e",* Mezirow has restated that the steps are illustrative of many of the experiences transformative learners go through (Mezirow, 2000, 2009). These steps are little changed since his initial presentation, and he has been consistent in their presentation over time (Marsick & Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow stated that each of them is a metaphorical description of praxis, an interplay or dialectic between action and understanding that acts to produce an altered state of being (Mezirow, 1978). As such, the steps may occur in different ways and in different orders. They may be cyclical or recursive and a learner may start anywhere in the steps and not include them all.

Mezirow has been forced to defend this list from critics on a number of occasions. The critics have sought, in their writings, to interpret it as a fixed list of essential steps that suggest Mezirow has said all transformative learners *must* go through each step in order to experience transformative learning. These critics appear to be suggesting that he is moving from a description of a process to a prescription for achieving transformative learning, although it is not clear from Mezirow's writing that this is his belief or intent (Taylor, 1998; Mezirow, 2000, 2009). The steps that follow are a direct quote, taken from his book written in 2000 in collaboration with other researchers and writers. It is important to stress again that Mezirow states that they may occur in different sequences, be repeated, but by the same token, could simply follow this layout. The steps themselves read in a dry manner, and I have added some illustrative examples and expanded comments in parentheses to clarify each step further.

1. A disorienting dilemma. (A person goes to a college for the first time in mid-life and experiences a legitimate and vastly different worldview to his or her own and becomes disoriented about their own beliefs and life choices – a disorienting dilemma. For example, the main character in the movie *Educating Rita* from 1983)

2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame. (The implication of the new worldview generates feelings that stem from an uneasy, and at times

Mezirow from Dissertation

frightening, consideration of previously ways of looking at the world that felt very certain.)

3. A critical assessment of assumptions. (The person undertakes an assessment via critical reflection of some of their underlying basic beliefs as a consequence of the self-examination of the previous step. For example, a person may critically reflect on why he or she had not valued themselves and has missed opportunities in life because of that initial assumption about their place in the world.)

4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared. (The person engages in rational discourse with friends, colleagues, family or fellow students and discovers that the new worldview is not foreign or weird to other people. They also discover that other people have had similar responses to learning in their lives and can understand the disruption of the disorienting dilemma.)

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions. (Rational discourse is used to work through possible alternate ways to move forward in life with close friends, peers, teachers or colleagues.)

6. Planning a course of action. (The person plans a way forward that will accord with their new larger, more flexible and developing worldview.)

7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan. (The person engages with different types of learning to gain specific knowledge and skills to follow their plan, such as training in new capabilities, or getting a new job.)

8. Provisional trying of new roles. (The person tries out their new roles in their life to see what happens, and to modify and adjust the roles as required, such as trying new work roles.)

9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. (The person continues to practice their new roles with greater confidence and a wider range of situations such as trying a new job or continuing with new work in their existing job.)

Mezirow from Dissertation

10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives. (The person integrates the new responses to life, and the new skills and abilities with those they care about, in such a way as to be respectful of the newly-acquired expanded, and more flexible worldview.)

Mezirow from Dissertation

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Mezirow from Dissertation

16

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Mezirow from Dissertation

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