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A Critical Review of the Empirical Research of Transformative Learning (1999-2005)

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Abstract: This is a review of transformative learning (TL) since 1998 involving 40 empirical studies. Findings include trends of less emphasis on identifying transformative experiences in different settings, and more about fostering TL and better understanding the nature of critical reflection, relationships, a perspective transformation, and context. Also, research designs are becoming more sophisticated.

Introduction

Since the last review of transformative learning (e.g., Taylor, 1998) there has been a significant increase in peer-review journal publications, both internationally and in a variety of disciplines (e.g., medical education, higher education, cooperative extension, health education, educational administration, distance education, and business communication). This increase in studies raises questions, such as: What are the trends of research of transformative learning theory since the last review? What new understandings have been discovered about essential components, such as critical reflection, dialogue, and relationships? How are research designs evolving? In response to these questions as well as others the purpose of this paper is to analyze the last seven years of research on transformative learning theory (TL).

Methodology of the Review

Literature searches were conducted on several databases (e.g., ERIC, Proquest, Medline, Lumina) using criteria broadened somewhat from the Taylor (1998) review to recognize the evolution of TL beyond Mezirow's (2000), inclusive of studies that were framed by other conceptions of TL. Each study: (a) used TL as its primary theoretical framework; (b) had a definitive methodology section, and (c) offered findings that informed the study of TL. Also, conceptual pieces were not included. In all, 40 studies were identified, most using Mezirow's conception of TL as a theoretical framework. However, there were five studies that were framed within related conceptions of TL (James, 2002; Jarvis, 1999, 2003; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003; Lange, 2004; Pohland & Bova, 2000). These studies included conceptions of TL from the perspective of depth psychology (e.g., Boyd & Meyers, 1989; Dirkx, 2000; Cranton, 1992), critical theory (Freire, 1984); and identity development (Wenger, 1998). Each study was obtained, read in its entirety and reviewed. The review begins with an overview of the various trends in the purposes of studies, settings and methodologies.

Purposes and Settings of Research

To understand the intent of these studies they are grouped around shared themes related to TL. The largest group contributed to our understanding about fostering TL (Berger, 2004; Christopher, Dunnagan, Duncan & Paul, 2001; Cohen, 2004; Feinstein, 2004; Franz, 2003; Garvett, 2004; Goldie, Schwartz, & Morrison, 2005; James, 2002; Jarvis, 1999, 2003; King, 2000, 2004; Lange, 2004; MacLeod, Parkin, Pullon, & Robertson, 2003; Mallory, 2003;

Pohland & Bova, 2000; Pugh, 2002; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Sinclair & Diduck, 2001; Taylor, 2003). Most settings were situated in higher education inclusive of graduate students and faculty, with little exploration in nonformal educational settings. Closely related are four studies that look at TL in relationship to some aspect of distance education and/or integrating technology in higher education (Cragg, Plotniko, Hugo, & Casey, 2001; King, 1999; 2001; Zieghan, 2001). Moving from application in the classroom, research reveals insight about essential components of TL: critical reflection (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Kreber, 2004; Liimatainne, Poskiparta, Karhila, & Sjögren, 2001) and relationships (Carter, 2002; Eisen, 2001; Lyon, 2001). In addition, three studies looked at power (McDonald, Cervero, Courtenay, 1999), purpose, and life mission (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003; Kroth & Boverie, 2000) in relationship to TL. The remaining studies focused on different transformative contexts: meaning-making of societal and/or personal crises (e.g., life threatening illness, health behavior change) (Baumgartner, 2002; Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, & Baumgartner, 2000; Dubouloz, Laporte, Hall, Ashe & Smith, 2004; Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; King, 2003); relationship-based organizing (Scott, 2003) and a second chance educational program (Bennetts, 2003). The most significant changes observed was the lack of emphasis on identifying a transformative experience in a particular context and greater interest about the nature of a learning experience and how it informs our understanding of TL. Despite these trends most studies continue to not critique previous research as well as Mezirow's theory itself.

Research Methods

The majority of studies continue to employ qualitative designs with an emphasis on “capturing a single (often retrospective) snapshot of their learning experience” (Baumgartner, 2002, p. 56). However research designs have become more sophisticated through the use of longitudinal, action research, and mixed method designs. The challenge for the longitudinal studies (e.g., (Liimatainne, Poskiparta, Karhila, & Sjögren, 2001; Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, & Baumgartner, 2000; Baumgartner, 2002; Taylor, 2003) is separating out what is related to transformative learning and what is not a product of normal development of the individual and/or socio-cultural change within society. A second trend is the emerging use of action research. Action research is seen as having “a natural affinity with transformative learning, as it allows the study of how understanding develops in the midst of bringing about change” (Lange, 2004, p. 123-24). Three studies were identified, each using a formal educational setting (e.g. workshops, continuing education, undergraduate education) and following a variation of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting phases of action research (Feinstein, 2004; Garvett, 2004; Lange, 2004). A third trend is the growing use of scales, surveys and or open-ended questionnaires to measure change in perspective. Most of these instruments were used in the context of mixed methods studies (Cragg, et. al, 2001; Goldie, Schwartz, & Morrison, 2005; King, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004; Mallory, 2003) accompanied by interviews. A fourth trend is the use of creative approaches (e.g. student portfolios, email, photo-elicitation and stimulated recall interviews via video) to collect data. (Liimatainne, et.al., 2001; MacLeod, et.al., 2003; Taylor, 2003; Ziegahn, 2001). Finally, similar to the last review the role of cultural difference and TL continues to be poorly understood. Several studies in this review designed the selection of participants with the potential for greater understanding of difference, such as gender and age (Carter, 2002; Jarvis, 1999; Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Kroth & Boverie, 2000; Lyons, 2001) and TL, however it was not a central focus of the research.

Findings

The findings are thematically organized, of major findings about the role of critical reflection, relationships, the meaning of a perspective transformation, fostering TL, and the relationship of context and TL. The paper concludes with an in-depth discussion of the findings have for the field research.

Reflection and Transformative Learning

Prior research established that critical reflection was essential to TL (Taylor, 1998). Continuing along this path new research sheds light on: its relationship to authenticity (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004), developmental nature (Liimatainen et. al, 2001), and influencing factors (e.g., relevancy, experience, levels of reflection) (Kreber, 2004). For example, Kreber (2004) explored reflection as a form of self-regulated learning. By looking at the levels of reflection identified by Mezirow (e.g., content, process, premise) in relationship to various domains of teaching knowledge (instructional, pedagogical, curricular) she found premise reflection (e.g., critical reflection) was the least common among participants of any teaching domain and experience seems to be a factor. Furthermore, she concludes that when learning about teaching, teachers need to begin with premise reflection in “order to be more meaningful” (p. 41), that is being more concerned with *why* they teach than *with* how or *what* to teach. A strength of this research is the development of clear indicators of levels of reflection, illustrating how previous research could be questioned due its often arbitrary and poorly defined efforts at identification. Further findings give support to the developmental nature of reflection (Liimatainen et.al., 2001) and credence to Merriam’s (2004) position that “mature cognitive development is foundational to engaging in critical reflection and rational discourse necessary for TL” (p. 65).

Transformative Relationships

Prior research had determined that relationships were important to TL, but until recently not much was known about the nature of transformative relationships. Current research has identified typologies (Carter, 2002), essential qualities (Eisen, 2001), chronological stages (Lyon, 2001) and insight about the nature of dialogue in relationships (Baumgartner, 2002; Carter 2002). For example, Carter (2002), who explored mid-career women’s learning in work-related developmental relationships, identified four categories of relationships as significant to women’s learning at work. They include utilitarian relationships, love relationships, memory relationships, and imaginative relationships. Love, memory, and imaginative relationships proved significant to TL, with intimate relationships as most significant. Inherent in relationships is the engagement in dialogue with others. Baumgartner (2002) found an essential byproduct of dialogue—consensual validation (valid by the process of discussing it), as for example, people whom were diagnosed HIV-positive “realized they were not alone on this transformational journey” (pp. 56-57). Further, the dialogue is not so much analytical, point-counterpoint-dialogue, but dialogue emphasizing relational and trustful communication—“highly personal and self-disclosing”(Carter, 2002, p. 82).

Perspective Transformation

A number of findings emerged from these studies about the nature of a perspective transformation and meaning scheme change (Carter, 2002; Christopher et. al, 2001; Cragg et. al, 2001; Eisen, 2001; King, 1999, 2000, 2003; Lyon, 2001) framed within Mezirow’s conception of TL. Most significantly, is the enduring nature and irreversibility of a TL, revealed in the

longitudinal study of how adults making meaning of HIV (Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, Baumgartner, 2000, 2002). Secondly, TL requires more than epistemological change (Garvett, 2004; Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Kroth & Boverie, 2000; Lange, 2004). For example, Lange (2004) in a study on fostering citizen action toward a sustainable society found TL includes “an ontological process where participants experience a change in their being in the world including their forms of relatedness” (p. 137). This need for fundamental change and action was further supported other studies (Baumgartner 2002, Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, Baumgartner, 2000; Feinstein, 2004; Garvett, 2004; King 2000; MacLeod et. al., 2003). Furthermore, two studies used other conceptual models of TL (e.g, Dewey, 1988; Wenger, 1998) not found in previous work (James, 2002; Pugh, 2002). Conceptually, these frameworks are fairly consistent with the previous definitions of TL, such that they emphasize a psychological view of change, but also they are more explicit about the need to act on change and the value of change for the individual.

Fostering Transformative Learning

The most significant change found in this review was the greater attention given to the practice of fostering TL. Nineteen studies were identified that attempted to foster TL directly and/or use it as a theoretical framework to help making meaning of teaching within a particular context. The particular focus of these studies cover a variety of areas, such as professional development of faculty and administrators (Garvett, 2004; King, 2004; Pohland & Bova, 2000); palliative care (Goldie, Schwartz, & Morrison, 2005; Macleod et. al., 2003; Mallory, 2003); ecological and restorative learning (Feinstein, 2004; Lange, 2004; Pugh, 2002; Sinclair & Diduck, 2001); intense group learning experiences (Cohen, 2004; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001); learning online (Cragg et. al., 2001; Ziegahn, 2001); learners in crisis (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; King, 2003); ESL (English as a second language) education (King, 2000); teaching belief change (Taylor, 2003); successful extension staff partnerships (Franz, 2003); the power of romantic fiction among recurrent students (Jarvis, 2003); and the identification of thresholds of transformations (Berger, 2004). Findings reveal insights into fostering TL: the need for personally engaging learning experiences (Feinstein, 2004; King, 2004; MacLeod et al., 2003; Mallory, 2003; Pohland & Bova, 2000); the availability of varied medium (romantic fiction, journaling, writing theses, on-line) to foster TL in the classroom (Cohen, 2004; Jarvis, 1999; King, 2000, 2004; Zieghan, 2001); and the importance of support and validation (Cohen, 2004; Bennetts, 2003; Garvett, 2004; King 2003; Pohland & Bova, 2000). Furthermore, findings reveal means to identifying students who are susceptible to a transformative experience (pedagogical entry points [Lange, 2004]; edge of meaning [Berger, 2004]), by paying attention to their discourse in response to personal questions. Finally, several studies reveal factors that inhibit TL in the classroom. For example, they include: rules and sanctions imposed on welfare women returning to work in a family empowerment project (Christopher, et. al, 2001); the downside of cohort experiences where there is often an unequal distribution of group responsibilities and an emphasis on task completion instead of reflective dialogue (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001); rigid role assignments and the need to be deliberate, both by the teachers and program designers, for TL to occur in graduate education (Taylor, 2003).

Context and Transformative Learning

In response to concerns raised in previous reviews and theoretical critiques a number of studies begin to provide greater clarity to the nature of context and the varying nature of a perspective transformation. By looking at the varying characteristics of a perspective

transformation (outcomes) it seems to demonstrate that many were a product of a particular transformative context. For example, HIV positive individuals engaged in “service to others” (Baumgartner, 2002; Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, Baumgartner, 2000), international sojourners developed intercultural awareness (King, 2000; Lyon, 2001), and students developed an awareness inequitable power in romantic relationships through studying romantic fiction (Jarvis, 1999). All of these outcomes were products of the unique context in which the transformation manifested, highlighting the role of context in shaping a transformative experience. On the other hand, there seem to be shared transformational characteristics that transcend context, such as greater self-directedness, assertiveness, self-confidence, and self-esteem, which support the emphasis of autonomy found in Mezirow’s (2000) interpretation of TL. Context has implications both at the personal and social level.

Scott (2003) in a study on national community organizers found that transformation includes both structural changes in the psyches of individual and in the structures of society. She sees the transformation of an individual’s perspective (rational worldview) as change in surface structures of the psyche, while the “social construction of transformation co-emerges in the learner and the setting, that is, the personal and the social in dialectical relationship transform” (p. 283). Similarly, in a study involving the transformation of individuals who become ethical-vegans, power proves central to shaping the transformative experience (McDonald & Cervero, 1999). They found that transformative learning does not adequately account for the enormous interpersonal and socio-cultural challenges associated with confronting the effects of power. Vegans never became completely free of the dominant ideology raising the concern that transformative learning gives too much to attention to the individual and not the individual within his or her socio-cultural context.

Discussion and Conclusion

Similar to the earlier review (Taylor, 1998), which concluded that there was a need for a more holistic interpretation of TL, the findings in this review seem to return to the fundamentals of TL, exploring many of the concerns identified in previous theoretical critiques (e.g. action, relationships, context, critical reflection, and power).

Beginning with critical reflection, research continually demonstrates its essentiality to TL. However, there are concerns with the lack of discrimination when identifying critical reflection among study participants and the lack of appreciation that all forms of reflection are not equally significant (Kreber, 2004; Liimatainen et.al 2000). Studies raise the possibility that previous research may have been too generous in assuming the presence of critical reflection (premise reflection) among participants while making meaning of a TL experience. Possibly researchers relied too strongly on the ability of participants to articulate critical reflective thought and also recall critical thought retrospectively. These findings should challenge researchers to provide more substantive data of critical reflection and at the same time explore other means for capturing its presence in relationship to TL. In addition, the shortcoming of accurately capturing critical reflection is not only a lack of recognition of different types, but as well could be an issue of development, as discussed by Merriam (2004). Research is needed in identifying factors that contribute to this development, along with longitudinal research to better understand how a critical reflective capacity evolves over time.

A second discussion point of this review concerns the practice of fostering TL. Most significant has been the varied disciplines that found this pedagogical approach to teaching adults helpful in guiding practice and explaining the change in perspective among students.

Despite the varied disciplinary perspective, a number of significant findings emerged (e.g., epistemological change not adequate, the need for explicit guidance and institutional support, pedagogical entry points). Furthermore, assuming epistemological change is not adequate for a transformation to reach fruition, it should remind educators that when fostering TL support (e.g., institutional, personal) and opportunities for action are often needed for change to occur. Also, these studies remind educators that fostering TL is much more than implementing a series of instructional strategies (small group activities, experiential learning), it involves the development of an acute awareness of student attitudes, discourse, and preferences over time, and as signs of change and instability (e.g., edge of meaning) begins to emerge, educators can respond accordingly. Despite the abundance of studies in the area of fostering TL, key areas continue to be overlooked, such as: a) the need for greater understanding about the student's role when fostering TL in the classroom, b) the lack of understanding of peripheral consequences (e.g., teacher and other students) of fostering TL in the classroom, and c) the lack of understanding on the impact of TL on learner outcomes.

A third point of discussion is the strong relational nature of TL further affirmed by this review. This questions the high degree of emphasis given to the autonomous and formal nature of TL and reveals a learning process dependent upon the need for support, trust, friendship, and intimacy. Unfortunately, still much is not known about the role of these more subjective and harder to capture aspects of relationships. How are they fostered appropriately and professionally, particularly within the context of teacher-student relationships? This also makes the case for better understanding the role of affective learning, its relationship to critical reflection, and how it is effectively engaged in practice. This latest review found little insight into the role of feelings in the classroom.

Finally, is the growing sophistication of research designs (e.g. action research, photography). TL provides a pedagogical framework for classroom teaching action research. TL and action research seem to share similar assumptions and outcomes about teaching for change, such as a participatory approach, the emphasis on dialogue, the essentiality of a reflective process in learning, and the need for action. More research is needed that simultaneously engages action research and transformative learning. Another emerging research phenomenon has been the engagement of photography and video when researching transformative learning. They can assist study participants who lack the necessary verbal skills and reflexive ability to adequately describe their beliefs, values, and or feelings, which often operate at a subconscious level. Also, photograph and video provide a means to help stimulate reflection through a mutual visual context for both the participant and researcher, promoting a more collaborative research experience (Taylor, 2002).

Transformative learning continues to be viable and active area of research regarding adult learning, both within the field of adult education and variety of related disciplines. In addition, with the growing interest in the practice of fostering transformative learning, it seemly has replaced andragogy as the iconic educational theory of the field, offering adult educators proven teaching strategies based on substantive research framed within sound theoretical assumptions. With a growing interest from various quarters outside adult education, it should challenge educators and researcher alike to not rest on their laurels. There is still much that is not known about transformative learning and much still to learn about how people revise their interpretations about the world around them.