The Theory and Practice of Transformative Learning:

A Critical Review

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by

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Foreword

The Educational Resources Information Center Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (ERIC/ACVE) is 1 of 16 clearinghouses in a national information system that is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. This paper was developed to fulfill one of the functions of the clearinghouse—interpreting the literature in the ERIC database. This paper should be of interest to adult educators and graduate students in adult education.

ERIC/ACVE would like to thank Edward W. Taylor for his work in preparing this paper. Dr. Taylor is a member of the Core Faculty of the Graduate Programs at Antioch University-Seattle. His dissertation was titled "A Learning Model of Intercultural Competency: A Transformative Process," and related papers have been published in ***Adult Education Quarterly (AEQ), International Journal of Intercultural Relations,*** and ***International Education*** and presented at the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC). He serves as Consulting Editor for AEQ and was recently elected to a 2-year term on the AERC Steering Committee.

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Executive Summary

The theory of transformative learning, the process of making meaning of one's experience, emerged from the work of Jack Mezirow and has been explored through numerous research studies and critiques over the last 20 years. As this monograph demonstrates, Mezirow has been its primary spokesperson, but other models of transformative education, particulary those of Robert Boyd and Paulo Freire, have contributed to the discussion. The paper begins with an overview of transformative learning theory, including Mezirow's notion of rational transformation, Boyd's concept of individuation, and Freire's view of social transformation.

The heart of the monograph is a review of theoretical and empirical literature, including numerous unpublished doctoral dissertations, that explores seven unresolved issues: individual change versus social action, decontextualized view of learning, universal model of adult learning, adult development—shift or progression, rationality, other ways of knowing, and the model of perspective transformation. Reflective notes in each section seek to inform practitioners about the application of theory to the practice of fostering transformative learning. The review identifies gaps and areas of controversy in Mezirow's work as well as research findings that attempt to elaborate on and broaden the theory.

An important assumption of this paper is that, although the theory is much discussed, the practice of transformative learning has been minimally investigated and is inadequately defined and poorly understood. To help improve practice, the third section outlines the essential conditions and techniques for fostering transformative learning and roles and responsibilities of educators-as-facilitators and of learners in creating the environment supporting critical reflection and exploration of alternative perspectives. One appendix organizes sources in the literature relevant to specific teaching-learning techniques; a second appendix is a table detailing the purposes and salient results of 46 research studies on transformative learning.

Information on transformative learning theory may be found in the ERIC database using the following descriptors: Adult Development, Adult Education, *Adult Learning, *Educational Theories,

Experiential Learning, Individual Development, *Social Cognition, *World Views; and identifiers: Mezirow (Jack), *Transformative Learning, *Transformation Theory (Adult Learning). Asterisks indicate terms that are particularly relevant.