

Epistemology of Transformative Learning

Jack Mezirow

Abstract: *This paper briefly examines the metacognitive process of transformative learning by which we critically assess taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations that support our beliefs, feelings and judgments and validate new meaning perspectives.*

Keywords: Transformative learning, Frames of reference, Epistemology, Metacognition, Rationality

“ . . . ‘[R]ational action’ on the common-sense level is always action within an unquestioned and undetermined frame of constructs of courses of action and personalities involved and taken for granted by the fellow-man. From this frame of constructs, forming their undetermined horizon, merely particular sets of elements stand out which are clearly and distinctly determinable. To these elements refers the common-sense concept of “rationality.”

Alfred Schultz (1967, 13-14)

Transformative learning may be understood as the epistemology of how adults learn to think for themselves rather than act upon the assimilated beliefs, values, feelings and judgments of others. An epistemology of evidential rationality involves reasoning—advancing and assessing reasons for making a judgment. Central to this process is critical reflection on assumptions and critical-dialectical discourse. Influences like power and influence, ideology, race, class and gender differences, cosmology and other interests may pertain. However, these influences may be rationally assessed.

Rationality is embodied in evolving traditions that hold that issues are resolved by reference to reasons, the governing principles of which evolve and change. As these traditions evolve, so do principles which define and assess reasons. Principles which define reasons and determine their force may change, but rationality remains the same—judgment and action in accord with reason, (Siegal, 1988, 135)

Our experiences of persons, things and events become realities as we typify them. This process has much to do with how we come to associate our experiences with our personal need for justification, validity and a convincing real sense of self. Expectations may be of events or of beliefs pertaining to one’s own involuntary reactions to events—how one subjectively expects to be able to cope. Our expectations powerfully affect how we construe experience; they tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. We have a proclivity for categorical judgment.

The process by which we tacitly construe our beliefs may involve taken-for-granted values, stereotyping, highly selective attention, limited comprehension, projection, rationalization, minimizing, or denial. That is why we need to be able to critically assess and validate the assumptions supporting our own beliefs and expectations and those of others.

Learning to decide more insightfully for oneself what is right, good and beautiful is centrally concerned with bringing into awareness and negotiating one’s own purposes, values, beliefs, feelings, dispositions and judgments rather than acting on those of others. If our human sense of freedom is associated with reflection and the self-modifying power of thought, then central is the process by which we assess or reassess the reasons supporting the way we think, feel and act, validate resulting transformations in perspective, and take action to implement them.

This requires that we understand how and why we, and others who communicate with us, have acquired our orienting habits of mind and resulting points of view and the nature of the tacit assumptions that support them.

Transformative Learning—a Summary

Adults:

- A. cannot fully trust what they know or believe because there are no fixed truths and circumstances change. Yet we urgently need to understand the meaning of our experience. To do so, we engage in deliberate learning—using prior interpretations to construe a new or revised experience as a guide to future action. We may also engage in incidental and assimilative learning.
- B. make meaning of their experience by imaginatively projecting value-laden symbolic models - images and conditioned affective responses—to interpret through analogy. This process operates tacitly through our acquired *frames of reference*—mindsets of orienting assumptions and expectations—predispositions with cognitive, affective and conative dimensions. Frames of reference include our values, affective dispositions, moral and aesthetic preferences, paradigms, learning preferences and sense of self. They involve orienting *habits of mind* and resulting *points of view*. They shape, delimit, and often distort the way we make meaning of our experience. Frames of reference are derived from the culture, language, and the idiosyncrasies of principal care givers.
- C. are intrasubjective—accepting others as agents with interpretations of their experiences that may prove true or justified.
- D. search for more dependable beliefs and understandings—those producing interpretations and opinions that are more true or justified—by assessing the intentions, experience and character of others communicating with us, and by becoming critically reflective about the assumptions supporting the beliefs, values, feelings, and judgments of those others, as well as about their own.
- E. validate contested beliefs pertaining to *instrumental learning* by empirically testing to ascertain whether an assertion is as it is purported to be—a truth claim. Instrumental learning involves controlling or managing the environment, improving performance or prediction.
- F. validate contested beliefs pertaining to *communicative learning* through discourse. Communicative learning involves understanding what others mean when they communicate with us. *Discourse* is that type of dialogue in which we participate with others whom we believe to be informed, objective and rational to assess reasons that justify problematic beliefs. Discourse leads to a best tentative judgment that is always subject to new insights, perspectives, evidence or arguments. The quality of this assessment is, itself, enhanced through free, full participation in a continuing discourse involving critical reflection on assumptions with an increasingly broad and more diverse group of informed and open minded participants having the widest range of views possible.

G. participate more freely and fully in discourse when they:

1. have more accurate and complete information,
2. are freer from coercion and distorting self deceptions,
3. are more open to alternative points of view—empathic and caring about how others think and feel,
4. are better able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively,
5. are able to become more aware of the context of ideas and critically reflective of assumptions, including their own,
6. have more equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse,
7. are more willing to seek understanding and agreement, and to accept a resulting best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are encountered, then subsequently validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment.

These ideal conditions of discourse also represent ideal conditions of adult learning and adult education. As such, they constitute an epistemic grounding for a philosophical commitment to social and cultural action by adult educators.

H. may transform their taken-for-granted frames of reference—when they become problematic—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally able to change and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

Within this context, mindful transformative learning about a change of belief involves:

1. recognition that an alternative way of understanding may provide new insight into a problem,
2. context awareness of the sources, nature and consequences of the *old* belief,
3. critical reflection on its supporting assumptions,
4. validating the *new* belief by an empirical test of the truth of its claims, when feasible, or by a continuing discursive assessment of its justification in order to arrive at a tentative best judgment and,
5. taking action on the validated new belief.

The process of change just described enhances one's *disposition* for making meaning through transformative learning. Critical reflection, then, may involve intuition or discernment. Transformative learning may also be mindlessly assimilative.

I. may have transformations that are *epochal* or *incremental*. And, these transformations may involve *objective* (task oriented) or *subjective* (self-reflective) *reframing*. In objective reframing, points of view are transformed when we become critically reflective on the *content* of a problem, or on the *process* of problem solving. *Habits of*

- mind* are transformed when we become critically reflective on the *premise* of the problem.
- J. when engaged in subjective reframing, often require the support of others, a positive self-concept and freedom from immobilizing anxiety. The transformative process occurs across the following phases in the clarification of meaning:
1. a disorienting dilemma;
 2. self- examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;
 3. a critical assessment of assumptions;
 4. recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
 5. exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions;
 6. planning a course of action;
 7. acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans;
 8. provisional trying of new roles;
 9. building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
 10. a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.
- K. are expected, as participants in a democracy, to be able to reflectively negotiate our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than to simply act upon those of others. The goal of adult education is to assist learners to more fully realize their capability for autonomous thought while pursuing their own learning objectives. Learner objectives may be personal, occupational, or involve collective social action; they may be to earn a higher education degree, learn a language, gain self-confidence, influence public policy, teach a child to read, keep intellectually active—among many other accomplishments.
- L. as educators concerned with transformative learning, assist learners to understand why they think, feel and believe as they do by:
1. critically assessing the validity of their own assumptions and those of others;
 2. analyzing and assessing the source, nature and consequences of assumptions;
 3. empathizing and providing emotional support for others to engage in transformative learning;
 4. learning to participate more fully and effectively in reflective discourse to assess the reasons for a belief or perspective;
 5. anticipating the consequences of acting upon a transformed perspective and planning effective action; and
 6. developing the disposition to think critically, assess one's own assumptions, and those of others, participate fully and freely in reflective discourse, and engage in cultural or social action to improve the conditions necessary to encourage adult learners to share these insights.

References

Schutz, A. (1967). *Collected papers: 1. The problem of social reality*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 13-14.

Siegel, H. (1988). *Educating reason; rationality, critical thinking and education*. N.Y: Routledge.