

Getting to know Transformative Learning Theory

By Dr. Patricia Cranton

At its core, transformative learning theory is elegantly simple. Through some event which could be as traumatic as losing a job or as ordinary as an unexpected question, an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world. Jack Mezirow (1991, 1997, 2000) developed the theory of transformative learning through a careful integration of theories, models, and ideas from a wide variety of sources. The theory continues to evolve through the inclusion of new perspectives on adult learning and development.

We expect what has happened in the past to happen again. If we failed to understand mathematics, we expect to continue to fail. If our boss has always been critical of our work, we expect her to continue to be critical. If our parents told us we were stupid, we think we are. Habits of mind are established. Habits of mind may have to do with our sense of self, our interpretation of social systems and issues, our morals and religious beliefs, and our job-related knowledge. It may take a significant or dramatic event to lead us to question assumptions and beliefs. Other times, though, it is an incremental process in which we gradually change bits of how we see things, not even realizing a transformation has taken place until afterwards.

There are now several perspectives on the process of transformative learning, each of which may be relevant in different contexts. *Critical reflection* is one means by which we work through beliefs and assumptions. It helps to talk to others, not only exchanging opinions and ideas or receiving support and encouragement, but also engaging in discussions where alternatives are seriously considered. *Connected and relational learning* emphasizes connected knowing rather than separate knowing and relationships among learners. *Social change* or social action is described as a goal of transformative learning by some theorists. The theory has been applied to understanding how *groups and organizations* change, and it can be seen as an approach to world views on *globalization and environmentalism*. The *extrarational approach* to transformative learning sees the learning as mediated by unconscious processes beyond the level of rational and conscious awareness. Insight, intuition, emotion, relationships, and personality may also play roles.