

Basic Theoretical Terms and Concepts: Overview

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Purpose: To introduce the basic terms in transformative learning theory, so as to have a common language for discussing and working with transformative learning.

Kinds of knowledge

Instrumental knowledge. Scientific cause-and-effect knowledge. Objective and invariant. Consists of principles, rules, technical information. Derived from scientific methodologies.

Communicative knowledge. Knowledge of ourselves, each other, and social norms. Interpretive in nature. Varies from one community or culture to another. Consists of values and beliefs. Socially constructed.

Emancipatory knowledge. Knowledge that leads to freedom from constraints and oppression (either personal or social). Subjective in nature. A product of critical reflection and critical self-reflection. Transformative learning leads to emancipatory knowledge.

Making Meaning

Meaning perspectives. Broad, generalized ways of seeing the world. May have to do with professional knowledge, social views, spiritual beliefs, self-concept, aesthetic preferences, morality, philosophy of life...

Meaning schemes. Specific assumptions, beliefs, values, and habitual expectations. Often uncritically assimilated. Often unarticulated. Clusters of meaning schemes make up meaning perspectives.

Habits of mind. A newer term used by Jack Mezirow. Similar to meaning perspectives. The “grooves” our mind runs in.

Points of view. A newer term. The way we express or demonstrate our habits of mind in interaction with others. Often unexamined or unconscious.

Epistemic meaning perspectives and meaning schemes. Our perspectives and assumptions related to knowledge and how we obtain knowledge. Similar to, but not completely congruent with, instrumental knowledge.

Sociolinguistic meaning perspectives and meaning schemes. Perspectives and assumptions derived from our culture, community, and social background, including the use of language in our culture. Similar to, but not completely congruent with, communicative knowledge.

Psychological meaning perspectives and meaning schemes. Perspectives and assumptions related to the way we see our Self. Usually formed in childhood. Sometimes the product of childhood trauma.

The Process of Transformative Learning

Trigger event. An event which initiates reflection on meaning schemes or meaning perspectives.

Disorienting dilemma. An older term. Similar to trigger event. Encountering something that is discrepant with how we understand ourselves or the world.

Critical reflection. Questioning assumptions, values, and perspectives we encounter in the world.

Critical self-reflection. Questioning our own meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. Examining the sources of the assumptions we hold and the consequences of continuing to hold them.

Content reflection. Asking ourselves “What has happened here?”, or “What is going on here?” Examining the content of the problem.

Process reflection. Asking ourselves how we came to hold a particular belief or assumption. “How did I come to believe this?” Examining the process.

Premise reflection. Asking ourselves why it is important to consider this issue (assumption, belief, perspective) in the first place. “Why does this matter?” Examining the premise. Premise reflection is most likely to lead to transformative learning.

Discourse. A special kind of dialogue or discussion in which people rationally weigh evidence and arguments and back up opinions with evidence. Central to transformative learning.

Ideal conditions for rational discourse. Participants in discourse are fully informed, have an equal opportunity to speak, are able to weigh evidence rationally, and have a goal of reaching consensus.

Individuation. A term taken from Jungian psychology. The differentiation of the individual from the collective of humanity. The formation of the Self. Integral to transformative learning.

Transformative learning. The revision of previously unquestioned perspectives and assumptions based on critical reflection and critical self-reflection, leading to more open, permeable, and better justified perspectives.