Transformative Learning as Discourse

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This article presents an elaboration of the epistemology of transformative learning in adult education. Transformative learning is understood as a uniquely adult form of metacognitive reasoning. Reasoning is the process of advancing and assessing reasons, especially those that provide arguments supporting beliefs resulting in decisions to act. Beliefs are justified when they are based on good reasons. The process of reasoning may involve such tacit knowledge as aptitudes, skills, and competencies. The article examines the nature of reasoning within the context of critical-dialectical discourse—the intersubjective process of communicative learning by which adults assess beliefs—and its implications for democratic citizenship and adult education.

**Keywords:** transformative learning; meaning perspective; frame of reference; critical reflection; discourse

Moral and intellectual immaturity are not an ineradicable constant of the human condition, no matter how much support they receive from political ideologies and the usual agencies of social life. We remain prisoners in the cave—part of a “mass”—only so long as we lazily allow the frescoes on the wall to define who we are as political and moral beings.

—Villa (2001, p. 304)

**Definition**

Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than
others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow, 1991, 2000).

Taken-for-granted frames of reference include fixed interpersonal relationships, political orientations, cultural bias, ideologies, schemata, stereotyped attitudes and practices, occupational habits of mind, religious doctrine, moral-ethical norms, psychological preferences and schema, paradigms in science and mathematics, frames in linguistics and social sciences, and aesthetic values and standards.

Learning Meaning

A key proposition of transformative learning theory recognizes the validity of Habermas’s (1984) fundamental distinction between instrumental and communicative learning. Instrumental learning is about controlling and manipulating the environment, with emphasis on improving prediction and performance. Instrumental learning centrally involves assessing truth claims—that something is as it is purported to be.

Communicative learning refers to understanding what someone means when they communicate with you. This understanding includes becoming aware of the assumptions, intentions and qualifications of the person communicating. When a stranger strikes up a conversation on a bus, one needs to know whether he or she is simply passing the time, intends to proselytize, or is trying to pick you up. When a stranger recommends a new medicine or an investment, one needs to know whether he or she is qualified to make such recommendation or judgment. The process of understanding involves assessing claims to rightness, sincerity, authenticity, and appropriateness rather than assessing a truth claim. The process of critical-dialectical discourse centrally involves assessing the beliefs of others to arrive at a tentative best judgment.

The distinction between instrumental and communicative learning is fundamental. In instrumental learning, the developmental logic is hypothetical-deductive, and empirical methods are more often appropriate for research. For communicative learning, the developmental logic involves analogic-abductive inference. Abductive reasoning is reasoning from concrete instances to an abstract conceptualization. To understand communicative learning, qualitative research methods are often more appropriate.

Conditions of Discourse

Discourse here refers to dialogue involving the assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values. Discourse involves topics referred to from the point of view of a particular frame of reference. Justification of a proposition must be assessed in relation to the particular frames of reference applied. To take the perspective of another involves an intrapersonal process, drawing on the information one has
about the speaker to form a model of the other. Perspective taking also involves
an interpersonal dimension, using feedback to adapt messages to the other’s per-
spective. What one talks about needs to be distinguished from what it means to
the speaker and why he or she talks about it. Understanding depends on the na-
ture and goal of the situation and its social relationships. For Habermas, ration-
ality is inherent in the use of language (Waldenström, 2001, p. 81).

Skills, sensitivities, and insights are relevant to participating in critical-dialec-
tical discourse—having an open mind, learning to listen empathetically, “brack-
eting” premature judgment, and seeking common ground. Qualities of emotional
intelligence (self-awareness and impulse control, persistence, zeal and self-mot-
vation, empathy, and social deftness) (Goleman, 1995) are obvious assets for de-
veloping the ability of adults to assess alternative beliefs and participate fully and
freely in critical-dialectical discourse. In communicative learning, emphasis is on
critical reflection and critical self-reflection, assessing what has been taken for
granted to make a more dependable, tentative working judgment.

Hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute, and intimidated people obviously
cannot participate fully and freely in discourse. As economic, social, and psycho-
logical conditions fostering social justice are essential for inclusion in effective
critical-dialectical discourse—the process by which we come to understand our
own experience—overcoming the threat of exclusion constitutes a significant
epistemological rationale for adult educators to commit themselves to economic,
cultural, and social action initiatives. It is important to understand that the only
alternatives to critical-dialectical discourse for assessing and choosing among be-
iefs are the appeal to tradition, an authority figure, or the use of force.

Adult Learning Capabilities

Learning to participate freely and fully in critical-dialectical discourse involves
two distinctively adult learning capabilities. One is what Robert Kegan (2000)
identified as the development of our uniquely adult capacity to become critically
self-reflective. The other is what King and Kitchener (1994) identified as reflec-
tive judgment, the capacity to engage in critical-dialectical discourse involving
the assessment of assumptions and expectations supporting beliefs, values, and
feelings. These adult capabilities are indispensable conditions for fully under-
standing the meaning of our experience and effective rational adult reasoning in
critical discourse and communicative learning.

King and Kitchener (1994) described the highest stage of reflective judgment as

individuals with fully differentiated abstract categories see the problematic nature of
controversies. The dissonance involved in understanding that a true problem exists
conversely pushes them to become active inquirers involved in the critique of condi-
tions that has been reached earlier, as well to become the generators of new hypothe-
ses. Since the methods of criticism and evaluation are applied to the self as well as
others, individuals see that the solutions they offer are only hypothetical conjectures
about what is, and their own solutions are themselves open to criticism and reevaluation. (p. 73)

Individuals at the final stage of reflective judgment can offer a perspective about their own perspective, an essential condition for transformative learning. Several years of careful research suggest that age and education are major factors in critical judgment. College graduates consistently earn higher scores on tests of reflective judgment.

When knowledge—beliefs, values, and judgments—is constructed through critical discourse—the synthesis of existing views and evidence—it is feasible to claim that, given current evidence or knowledge, some judgments or interpretations have greater validity than others. One may also reasonably contend that a given judgment is a supportable tentative conclusion on which to act until a new perspective, evidence, or argument is encountered and validated through critical-dialectical discourse. All conclusions remain open to the possibility of a future assessment by a larger, more diverse group.

Transformative learning is coextensive with rationality in instrumental and communicative learning. As the goal in communicative learning is mutual agreement rather than knowledge of an object or testing a truth claim, power relationships and cultural inequalities can distort the validity of a reasoned outcome and, hence, are a major concern of adult educators.

Transformative learning involves critical reflection of assumptions that may occur either in group interaction or independently. Testing the validity of a transformed frame of reference in communicative learning requires critical-dialectical discourse. Habermas’s concept of emancipatory learning is here interpreted as the process of transformative learning that often takes the form of task-oriented problem solving in instrumental learning and critical self-reflection in communicative learning.

Critical reflection requires understanding the nature of reasons and their methods, logic, and justification. Transformative learning is metacognitive reasoning involving these same understandings but, in addition, emphasizes insight into the source, structure, and history of a frame of reference, as well as judging its relevance, appropriateness, and consequences.

Democratic Citizenship

There is a widely held view that more democratic participation will produce citizens who are

more tolerant of difference, more sensitive to reciprocity, better able to engage in moral discourse and judgment and more prone to examine their own preferences—all qualities conducive to the success of democracy as a way of making decisions. . . . For Habermas, discourse is an organizing principle of democratic judgment and legitimacy. (Warren, 1995, pp. 167-171)
Autonomy in discursive democracy involves a moral dimension. By participating in discourse with other affected individuals adults who challenge one’s interpretations can develop reflective judgment. This is the basis for Habermas arguing that Lawrence Kohlberg’s final stage of moral development in adulthood should be “discourse ethics,” achieved through reasoning with focus on the particularity of differences in points of view. We develop principles of judgment only by conversing with those affected.

Mark Warren (1995, p. 167) wrote that the tradition of “radical democracy” (Jefferson and Emerson, Marx and Gramsci, John Stuart Mill and Dewey) all noted that democratic participation is an important means of self-development and producing individuals who are more tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity, better able to engage in moral discourse and judgment, and more self-reflective.

Transformative learning addresses the other side of the coin, direct intervention by the educator to foster the development of the skills, insights, and especially dispositions essential for critical reflection—and self-reflection—on assumptions and effective participation in critical-dialectical discourse (reflective judgment)—essential components of democratic citizenship. Dana Villa (2001) analyzed how this same process was central to Socrates’s conception of democratic citizenship, described his method of adult instruction, and illuminated its moral and civic implications.

**Adult Education**

Although adults may developmentally acquire the capabilities to become critically self-reflective and exercise reflective judgment, the task of adult education is to help the learner realize these capabilities by developing the skills, insights, and dispositions essential for their practice.

To foster the ability to reason in adulthood, the adult educator must help learners acquire the skills, sensitivities, and understandings essential to become critically reflective of assumptions and to participate more fully and freely in critical-dialectical discourse. Although the educator helps the learner assess and achieve the learner’s objective, the professional goal of the educator is to foster the learner’s skills, habit of mind, disposition, and will to become a more active and rational learner. This involves becoming more critically reflective of assumptions supporting one’s own beliefs and those of others and more discriminating, open, and disposed to transformative learning. This skeptical stance may involve challenging one’s own strongly held views. A discriminating skeptic may have strong values, but his or her understandings are always open to reassessment as new perspectives and assessments are encountered.

Creating the conditions for and the skills of effective adult reasoning and the disposition for transformative learning—including critical reflection and dialectical discourse—is the essence of adult education and defines the role of the adult
educator, both as a facilitator of reasoning in a learning situation and a cultural activist fostering the social, economic, and political conditions required for fuller, freer participation in critical reflection and discourse by all adults in a democratic society.

References


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