Transformative Learning in Practice: Frames of Reference, Habits of Mind, and Critical Reflection in the Contemporary Context

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Abstract—**One of the most influential theories in the field of Adult Education is considered to be Jack Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning, which argues that adults possess the capacity to think, inquire, and critically reflect upon their experiences, viewpoints, and established assumptions, to revise distorted beliefs through communicative learning, and to act transformatively in relation both to their own reality and frames of reference, as well as to their surrounding environment. For this reason, it is supported that transformative learning may be implemented through objective or subjective reframing (Mezirow, 1991a).**

Within the framework of this paper, and based on the study and analysis of a short incident that took place in a Second Chance School, mention will be made to two frames of reference and habits of mind expressed by individuals involved in the incident. Additional examples of dysfunctional frames of reference will be presented, and the broader structural context that reinforced these dysfunctional assumptions will be analysed.

Finally, following the study of Edward Taylor's views on Transformative Learning, key points that differentiate certain aspects of the theory will be discussed, particularly in relation to the empirical substantiation of the theory. Reference will also be made to a well-established scholarly article that analyses and comments on one of these points, briefly presenting its main conclusions.

Keywords: Transformative Learning Theory; Dysfunctional Frames of Reference; Frame of Reference; Jack Mezirow; Edward Taylor

TOPIC 1

1.1.Dysfunctional Habits of Mind and Frames of Reference

According to Transformative Learning Theory and Mezirow, a frame of reference consists of two basic elements: habits of mind and points of view. Habits of mind are broad, generalized predispositions and assumptions that guide the way we think, interpret the world, and behave. They take various forms (sociolinguistic, moral, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, aesthetic, etc.), are closely connected to personality, and therefore are particularly difficult to modify.

According to Mezirow, the noble aim of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1998c) is the modification of problematic and dysfunctional habits of mind through the use of various forms of critical reflection (Freire, 1973) and reflective dialogue, as well as the transformation of related points of view, with which they are in direct dialectical relation. Points of view, therefore, are related to perceptions, emotions, evaluations, and corresponding patterns of reaction. Thus, related points of view constitute expressions of a habit of mind through which it is manifested (Kokkos et al., 2020).

Our values, attitudes, beliefs, and the way we perceive ourselves and others are closely linked to our frames of reference, which provide us with stability and the security of belonging to a community and are therefore protected. Views that challenge our frames of reference are often judged and rejected as problematic, irrational, or distorted. On the other hand, a valid and reliable frame of reference produces more justified and accurate interpretations compared to a less reliable one (Taylor, 1998).

Based on the above, in the incident studied, which took place in a Second Chance School, problematic frames of reference and, consequently, distorted habits of mind can be identified, expressed by individuals participating in the incident. Moreover, these views reflect an ethnocentric and racist behavioural stance, connected to incomplete assumptions that generate negative judgments towards individuals considered "foreign" or "intrusive" within an already established group (in this case, the educational group).

In our example, the trigger for the expression of such views was the information that a new learner (of foreign origin) was going to join the school in the middle of the academic year. Possibly, he would not speak Greek, and this fact was metonymically perceived as the cause for expressing fears regarding the disruption of group cohesion and reservations about his country of origin and communication ability ("This foreigner will not speak Greek well. How will we communicate?").

Furthermore, objections were raised regarding the enrolment and acceptance of foreign learners in the school.

In the incident examined, these dysfunctional frames of reference appear to be related, in our view, both to causal assumptions of cause-and-effect relationships (interpretive, predictive, etc.) and to normative and paradigmatic assumptions, that is, beliefs about how things should function in relation to others and to one's own self and personal identity (Brookfield, 2012). As such, they may be classified under sociolinguistic habits of mind, which concern etiquette rules, ideologies, and norms connected to society, the state, and culture (Mezirow et al., 2007).

Finally, additional frames of reference that could be included within this habit of mind are statements such as "foreigners finish our schools and steal our jobs" or that "their integration into Greek society will alter our national and cultural identity and uniqueness."

1.2. Context for the Formation of Dysfunctional Frames of Reference

What, then, is the broader context that reinforced the cultivation and adoption of the aforementioned frames of reference?

It is a fact that even simple words of everyday language can lead to the reproduction of social discrimination and, under favourable conditions, to the emergence and promotion of racism of all kinds. At the same time, contemporary multicultural schools consist of learners who differ in language, customs, traditions, values, ideas, culture, beliefs, and religious faith, an undoubtedly positive factor for social development and human existence in general, yet one that also entails significant challenges in preventing, addressing, and managing aggressive or racist phenomena (Nikolaou, 2003).

However, within the social and particularly the school context, there is often a tendency to categorise and distinguish members of one's own group from those of other ethnic or racial groups, which are frequently perceived as intellectually and socially inferior and evaluated more negatively than one's own group.

This is why social categorisation is conducive to the formation of stereotypical and negative behaviours, particularly within the school environment, as learners are often influenced by prejudices and stereotypes originating from their family background and the broader social context to which they belong. This tendency is clearly illustrated in the study of the short incident in a Second Chance School and the learners' reaction to the possible presence of a foreign individual in the educational setting (Kokkos, 2017).

More specifically, the educator does not appear able to calm or manage the learners' negative reactions. Educators should be properly trained and possess specialised studies and knowledge, serving as role models whose attitudes do not promote negative perceptions but rather foster anti-racist models, especially in an era when difference must be accepted and respected. The institution of the school must treat learners equally, democratically, with justice, freedom, empathy, and full acceptance. Only under these conditions can sincere relationships of acceptance of difference, regardless of origin, be built (Warnecke, Masters & Kempter, 1992).

Finally, additional broader reinforcing factors contributing to the expression of these frames of reference may include a lack of humanistic education and intellectual impoverishment, the devaluation of moral values, low educational attainment that facilitates manipulation of thought and conscience, economic competition and interests, crises across all sectors of life, feelings of superiority or inferiority fostering jealousy, envy, hatred, a sense of dominance and power over others, political expediencies, and other factors (Baldwin-Edwards, 1991).

TOPIC 2

2.1. Edward Taylor: Critique of Transformative Learning Theory

Edward Taylor, a prominent scholar and researcher in education, along with many others, engaged extensively with Transformative Learning Theory and its constituent elements. He focused on key concepts and aspects that, although theoretically developed, had not been empirically substantiated due to the limited publication of significant research studies and, consequently, insufficient empirical depth and reinforcement of the core components and validity of Transformative Learning (Taylor, 2007).

Accordingly, central assumptions and aspects of Transformative Learning (Simonsen & Illeris, 2014) that have been neglected and require further analysis include the concept of diversity, the importance of social background (Illeris, 2014b), cultural differentiation, origin, culture, relationships, and emotions; the role of prior experiences—particularly educational experiences—that can decisively influence the process of transformation; the significance of frames of reference in shaping transformative experience; and other related factors (Mezirow, 1997b).

More specifically, according to Edward Taylor's assessments, there is a lack of research addressing the relationship between Transformative Learning, learning styles, and learners' age, in order to determine whether these constitute influencing factors in the transformation process. At the same time, concerns have been

raised regarding the linearity of the phases, as the process is considered to be more fluid, individual, and recursive than initially suggested. For this reason, greater emphasis should be placed on internal and external conditions of transformation and on different types of reframing over time, rather than limiting analysis to isolated educational events. Finally, research should focus on emotional management during the transformation process, strategies for enhancing Transformative Learning, and designs for collaborative inquiry, research, and data collection (Karalis & Liodaki, 2013).

In conclusion, there is an urgent need for a shift in the orientation of research on Transformative Learning Theory, one that emphasises all its complex dimensions through holistic research designs and valid methodological approaches, with the ultimate aim of the scientific validation of a sustainable and reputable model for adult education (Mezirow, 2007b).

2.2. Scientific Article: Issues and Findings

In relation to the above, a published article that highlights the value and foundational role of educational experiences, relationship quality, and emotions within Transformative Learning Theory—and fully aligns with Edward Taylor's findings—is that of Karalis & Liodaki (2013), entitled "Transformative Learning and Educational Experiences in Higher Education."

This article investigates the transformation of students' perceptions (undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Patras) during their studies, as well as the educational experiences that contributed to this transformation, based on Transformative Learning Theory. The research findings indicated that students experienced improvement-oriented and behaviourally oriented changes, primarily reinforced by the educational activities in which they were engaged throughout their studies.

Notably, the study also highlighted the significant role of emotions and relationships in the transformation of perspectives, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. The majority of participants considered that the quality of these relationships and their communicative characteristics could enhance their psycho-spiritual development, self-confidence, and, consequently, any positive and transformative change in character.

Finally, both the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the research data confirms the noteworthy changes (Christou, 2020) in students' attitudes, viewpoints, and beliefs regarding their future teaching role and the multiple dimensions of the educational process.

Conclusions

This paper presented the foundational theory of Adult Education—Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory—and key concepts such as habits of mind and frames of reference. Based on a specific incident, examples of dysfunctional frames of reference were presented, along with the broader context in which they were consolidated.

Additionally, aspects of Edward Taylor's critique of Transformative Learning Theory that require further empirical research were identified and analysed, and one such aspect was concisely presented through the examination of a relevant scientific article and its findings.

Overall, it became evident that Mezirow's theory remains open to dialogue and, through this openness, can be continuously redefined, evaluated, and expanded, incorporating critical and contemporary theoretical approaches. The theory emphasises critical and rational thinking and reflective dialogue, while respecting the deeper needs of adult educators, who must continuously expand and update their knowledge, as well as the autonomous and conscious choices of adult learners.

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