

**PERCEPTIONS OF THE NATURE AND PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATIVE
LEARNING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE.**

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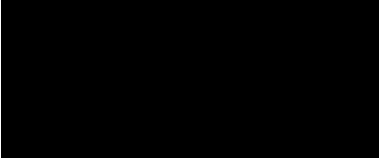
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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degrees.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY	i
TITLE PAGE	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF APPENDICES	ix
ABSTRACT	x
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION - A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED	1
THE ORIGINS OF THE STUDY	2
THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	8
The research question:	10
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	11
TITLE OF THE THESIS AND METHODOLOGY	13
KEY CONCEPTS	15
Learning	15
Adult learning	16
Learning as critical reflection upon experience	17
Transformative learning	18
The processes and the procedures of transformative learning	20
DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	21

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	22
CONCLUSION	23
2. TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING - THE LITERATURE	25
KNOWLEDGE AND ITS RELATION TO LEARNING	26
THEORIES OF LEARNING	27
Behaviourism	27
Cognitivism	29
Humanism	30
Learning and developmental psychology	32
ADULT LEARNING	34
Andragogy	35
Beyond andragogy	38
A constructivist approach to adult learning	40
TRANSFORMATIVE DIMENSIONS OF ADULT LEARNING	41
The disorienting dilemma	44
Conscientisation and praxis	46
A theory of knowledge-constitutive interests	48
Instrumental, communicative and emancipatory learning	50
Meaning perspectives and meaning schemes	53
Perspective transformation and transformative learning	54
THE PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	57
Transformative learning - the emotional component	58
PROCEDURES FOR FACILITATING ADULT LEARNING	59
Transformative learning - the role of discourse and dialogue	60

Transformative learning - the imagination and the use of autobiography	61
Ethical considerations	62
CRITIQUES AND QUALIFICATIONS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	63
Transformative learning and normative psychological development	65
Transformative learning - an individual or a social process?	66
CONCLUSION	68
3. RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS AND ANALYSIS	70
THE RESEARCH QUESTION	70
Choice of a qualitative methodology for the research	73
A STRUCTURE FOR THE RESEARCH	75
The informed practitioners	77
The learner-participants	82
The “Facilitating Adult Learning” program	83
DATA COLLECTION	90
Structured interviews	93
Participant observation	96
Ethical aspects of the research	99
DATA ANALYSIS	101
The QSR NUD*IST data analysis package	102
Preparation of data for analysis	104
CONCLUSION	106

4. THE NATURE AND PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	108
THE NATURE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	109
Personal transformation	115
Transformative learning - an emotional experience	117
Transformative learning - liberating and emancipatory	119
Transformative learning as personally empowering	121
Transformative learning in relation to collective and social transformation	124
Transformative learning and personal therapy	126
THE PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	129
The disorienting dilemma and transformative learning	131
Emotional processes involved in transformative learning	134
The subconscious and transformative learning	138
The imagination and transformative learning	140
CONCLUSION	143
5. THE PROCEDURES AND IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	147
PROCEDURES FOR FACILITATING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	147
Creating an appropriate learning environment	149
Structuring critical reflection upon the self	152
Attendance to personal feelings	154
Group work, discourse and dialogue	157
Personal journal writing	160
Autobiography and critical reflection	162
Structuring the creative imagination	164
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	166
Learning contracts	167
Respect for learners	169

Learners accepting responsibility for their own learning	170
The interface between transformative learning and therapy	171
Facilitators' own agenda	174
CONCLUSION	175
6. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH	177
THE NATURE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	178
Questions of terminology	183
Meaning perspectives and meaning schemes	186
Transformative learning as a process leading to liberation and empowerment	189
Learning and transformative learning	192
THE PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	195
Cognitive processes of transformative learning	195
Transformative learning and normative psychological development	197
Transformative learning as an emotional process	198
Transformative learning as an imaginative process	199
STRATEGIES CONDUCIVE TO FACILITATING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING	202
Creating an appropriate learning environment	203
Structuring critical reflection upon all aspects of experience	204
"Telling one's story" and using the creative imagination	206
Transformative learning and personal therapy	207
Transformative learning and social transformation	209
Ethical considerations	209
CONCLUSION	210

7. CONCLUSIONS AND A WAY FORWARD	213
UNDERSTANDINGS	214
The nature of transformative learning	215
The processes of transformative learning	218
APPLICATIONS	220
AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH	222
BIBLIOGRAPHY	224
APPENDICES	242
APPENDIX A: Prompt paper for interviews with practitioners and participants	242
APPENDIX B: Transcript of interview with Emeritus Professor Jack Mezirow as introduced to QSR NUD*IST	244
APPENDIX C: Example of letter to practitioners confirming the interview	255
APPENDIX D: Example of letter sent with transcripts of the interviews to all practitioners and participants	256
APPENDIX E: Example of letter sent to practitioners with drafts of Chapters four and five in which quotations from interviews are cited	257
APPENDIX F: The first four levels of the QSR NUD*IST “tree” for the research	258
APPENDIX G: A printout from QSR NUD*IST of all nodes, including definitions and number of text units for documents indexed at each node	259
FIGURE	
FIGURE 2.1: Interest, knowledge and learning domains	51

ABSTRACT

The “problem of practice” which gave rise to the study described in this thesis had its origins in the writer’s perception over a considerable period that whilst all adults learn through their experience, some appear more open and less constrained by what they have learned through their past experience than others. An individual’s openness to new learning in a particular area appears in certain circumstances to be affected by attitudes and assumptions he/she has already acquired in that regard over time. On the basis of research into the learning experiences of mature women participating in re-entry programs offered by community colleges and universities in the United States during the 1970s, and using certain theoretical constructs derived from Freire (1971, 1972) and Habermas (1971, 1973), Jack Mezirow (1978a, 1981) developed an approach to the learning of adults which he at first called perspective transformation (1973b, 1981) and more recently transformative learning (1985, 1990, 1996). Mezirow’s definition of this type of learning was that it involved the emancipatory process of learners becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of their psycho-cultural assumptions can come to constrain the way they see themselves and their relationships, reconstituting such “meaning perspectives” to permit a more critically reflective and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these revised understandings (Mezirow 1981).

This thesis considers the debate on the subject of transformative learning over the past two decades including the changes Mezirow has made to his theoretical position during the period, most notably in 1985 when he expanded the concept of transformative learning to include instrumental and communicative learning. A study of the literature and especially the work of Collard and Law (1989), Hart (1990), Tennant (1990) and Newman (1993) suggests that there are aspects of transformative learning which are problematic and controversial. It also reveals that the development of the concept of transformative learning by Mezirow and others over the past two decades has been based largely upon theoretical explication rather than empirical research. The core question upon which the research described in this thesis is based seeks to explore the nature, processes, strategies for facilitation and implications for practice of transformative learning through an empirical study of the actual experiences of teachers and learners.

A research design was developed involving interviews with adult educators who have been significant contributors to the literature of transformative learning and who are at the same time professionally involved as facilitators of adult learning programs. This group is referred to in the thesis as “the practitioners” and includes Mezirow himself. A second group, the learners identified as “the participants”, was selected from adults attending a program *Facilitating Adult Learning* conducted for six days spread over ten weeks by one of the practitioners. The researcher himself took part in this program as a participant-observer. Data was collected by means of interviews with both practitioners and participants and the reflections of the researcher himself recorded twice each day during the program. The interview transcripts were analysed using a computer based program designed to handle interviews (QSR NUD*IST).

The findings of the research indicate support for the concept of transformative learning and they endorse Mezirow’s view of its emancipatory and liberating potential. Emotional and imaginative as well as cognitive processes in transformative learning emerged as significant. As a result of the research the writer accepts Mezirow’s definition of “meaning perspectives” and of transformative learning as the identification and transformation of a learner’s meaning perspectives relevant to a particular area of acquired learning. The thesis questions Mezirow’s choice and continued use of the term “meaning schemes” on the basis of both precision of meaning and consistency of application. It questions also his extension since 1985 of the concept of transformative learning to cover instrumental and communicative learning. The thesis identifies certain processes associated with transformative learning and strategies of facilitation found to be appropriate and productive. Ethical considerations and especially the obligation upon facilitators to respect the autonomy of individuals in regard to transformative learning are identified as significant. The thesis recommends further empirical research with more disparate groups of participants, study of the relevance of transformative learning to educators and educational administrators in times of change, and empirical research into whether the concept of transformative learning can be extended to the transformation of social, political and economic meaning perspectives held collectively.

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

T S Eliot. Four Quartets 1942