

Transformative Learning and Organizational Development

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Much of the background for the dynamics of the learning organization is based on the theoretical work of Jurgen Habermas and Jack Mezirow—with some attention to the work of David Kolb (the experiential learning cycle). The idea of transformative learning is at the root of much of what is being proposed in contemporary organizational literature.

For a more complete understanding of this background, consult sources such as: Dewey, Freire, Mezirow, Habermas (since Habermas is a bear to read, Patricia Cranton's book, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, Jossey-Bass, 1994 is recommended). In addition, consult the works of Stephen Brookfield (*Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*), Philip Candy (*Self-direction for Lifelong Learning*), Sharron Merriam and Rose Caffarella (*Learning in Adulthood*), and K. Patricia Cross (*Adults as Learners*).

The notion of transformative learning is a compelling one for those who advocate the need for learning organizations (which grows out of a preoccupation with organizational *development*). It takes the educator/leader beyond the somewhat simplistic scheme of learning styles and links developmental concerns with *types* of learning.

Why would this linking with “types” be significant?

Essential processes in adult learning that undergird organizational learning are described as critical thinking, reflection, and action (or *praxis*)—all stimulated by questioning designed to make assumptions and preconceptions explicit. Important questions center around issues such as the nature of truth, the degree of learner autonomy, the role of the educator/leader, the nature of the organizational climate.

Cranton described Habermas' categories for types of learning as *technical* (controlling and manipulating the environment), *practical* (the use of language to further understanding and the coordination of social action to satisfy mutual needs), and *emancipatory* (the drive to grow and develop as individuals and societies). The next step is to posit that different types of learning require different forms of knowledge. Technical learning requires *instrumental knowledge* (knowledge of the causal relationships). *Practical knowledge* (understanding others through language and understanding of norms and culture) is necessary for practical learning. *Emancipatory knowledge* (self-knowledge, knowledge of past experience and social context) is necessary for emancipatory learning.

Mezirow, interpreting Habermas, proposed three types of learning: *Instrumental learning* (determining cause and effect relationships, forming hypotheses, making predictions); *Communicative learning* (understanding what others mean, making oneself understood); *Emancipatory learning* (freedom from that which would limit control over one's life--through critical self-reflection).

IN WHAT WAYS ARE THESE PROCESSES SIGNIFICANT IN ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Reflection is considered a key process in transformative learning. A consequence in education is the concern to fashion educational goals that want students to learn how to think as opposed to simply memorizing content. In organizations, the concern is to promote the types of experiences that will foster interpersonal *dialogue* (not just talk) and thinking together, across several divisions and/or functions of the organization.

Obviously, common criticisms by transformative learning advocates, in relation to schooling, have to do with learning the content, and the sharp or arbitrary divisions between the three types of learning (however they are expressed). Learning is generally considered to comprise a more complex interplay than the divisions suggest; and meaning schemes and experiences of reflection require some cognitive/content

grounding. Admittedly, education that relies almost exclusively on memorization is difficult to justify in an age where powers of judgment and decision making are so clearly needed.

But what is the nature of a methodology and learning climate that would permit the adult educator (not to mention educators of children and youth) to artistically blend the multi-facets of the learning process? Similarly, what is the role of the educator in relation to her or his own content? Should the educator suspend engagement and leave all decisions for learning up to the learner-participant? “Brookfield is clear that implementing self-directed learning does not require an educator to abandon his or her own goals and act in a purely accommodative fashion” (Cranton, 58). The issue of learner autonomy is also critical. Perhaps Candy is most helpful when he describes learner autonomy as a process and not a product. In other words, learners are autonomous in varying degrees and ways depending on circumstance and life condition.

Transformational learning deals with changes in one’s consciousness and understanding. Learning entails becoming aware of how one perceives and feels about the world; reformulating assumptions in light of new evidence; and acting upon new understandings. Mezirow, building on a substantial foundation of others’ thought, popularized these ideas for adult educators and subsequently for organizational learning theorists. Given the desired outcomes of transformational learning, it is not surprising that the concept has been applied to the learning organization.

In the learning organization, issues of truth (or content) are nearly always resolved by an appeal to group process--to the release of knowledge through dialogue. ‘Meaning perspectives’ are developed as participants begin to view the organization as a whole and learn how to integrate their parts into the whole. The nature of organizational development is qualitatively changed as persons begin to change their mental images (metaphors) of the organization; and as they are given opportunity to construct meaning out of their experiences (see Peter Senge *The Fifth Discipline*, and Chawla and Renesch *Learning Organizations*).

However, transformative learning in and of itself will not produce a learning organization. Charles Handy (“Managing the Dream” in Chawla and Renesch) alludes to what is perhaps the most critical factor in the development of a learning organization. Handy observed that organizations typically operate on the assumption of incompetence. “The characteristics of this assumption are controls and directives, rules and procedures, layers of management and pyramids of power--all very costly” (46). Undergirding the development of the learning organization is the assumption of competence. “. . . each individual can be expected to perform to the limit of his or her competence, with the minimum of supervision” (46). Implications of this assumption range from the need for the dynamics of trust, forgiveness and togetherness, to the necessity of working and leading in teams, to the need for continual learning and dialogue.

SIFT OUT THE FACTORS IN THE ABOVE RELATED TO TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING IN PREPARATION FOR CONSIDERATION OF IMPLICATIONS. LIST THE FACTORS BELOW.