

International conference

Transformative Learning in Time of Crisis: Individual and Collective Challenges¹

What has a Pakistan girl to do with the ambitious US law student or with Mexican peasants? What have a Kazakh business psychologist in common with the US military officers or with drug addicts in Greece? Japanese women doctoral candidate with Muslim victims of ethnic conflict in India? Not too much, except the way their learning process has gone through – transformative learning theory claims, that they all have learned to see and to interpret their life and experiences from the new perspective.

The Theory of Transformative Learning

Transformative Learning is one of the most influential learning theories emerged in XX century in adult education field. It looks at the deep meaning of learning process to the life of individuals and groups and at the significant changes that learning has initiated or supported. The main idea is that learning occurred just if some change in one's meaning perspective happened, some paradigm shift, or if adult person reframed his/her world-view or belief system. Main focus in this kind of learning is on the learner's experiences and the ways he/she copes with it.

Since Jack Mezirow, an American professor and educator, introduced perspective transformation and transformative learning in the mid-seventies, the theory become very popular, for several reasons – it was modern in approach, target-group oriented, flexible in application, diverse in methods proposed for use. Mezirow identified several ways to stimulate transformational learning, such as: journal writing, metaphors, life history exploration, learning contracts, group projects, role play, case studies, and using literature to stimulate critical consciousness. Different learning experiences could thus have been packed under this

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label and interpreted from the point of view of this theory, such as relevant life-events and crises -divorce, death in the family or friends' circle, unemployment and financial crises, various disasters and accidents, illness... It is important how a person interprets these experiences, what meaning does he or she attribute to it and how it could be changed so that person has a new view on what happened and can learn from it for the sake of future actions.

The Conference on Transformative Learning

The last two decades were marked by a flood of articles, books and events related to transformational learning theory. An example of it is a serial of International Conferences on Transformative Learning – the first one was held in 1998 in USA, Columbia University. The last, 9th one, is the first one held in Europe, in Athens, May 28th – 29th. The theme of this Conference was „Transformative Learning in Time of Crisis: Individual and Collective Challenges” and gathered participants from 27 countries all over the world. Referring to the global crises and its several aspects (political, financial, ecological, social...), this conference offered an interpretation of this phenomenon from the point of view of transformative learning – as a potential opportunity for individual and collective transformation. Two panels were dedicated to: North American perspective, and to European perspectives.

From the abundance of papers presented at the conference, the broad range of the topics and areas covered by transformative learning theory could be observed, as well as diversity of approaches:

- Health crises as the chance for transformative learning were tackled for example by the papers on HIV/AIDS and Breast Cancer;
- Political changes, issue of democratisation and transition in the countries that went through political upheavals, conflicts or wars, were subject of many papers, as well as issues like political violence and terrorism;
- Ecological problems seemed to be part of adult learning area more than ever – many papers dealt with it, for example with Haiti's Earthquake, Ecological Literacy etc;
- Target groups described in the papers demonstrated that there is no single group whose specific experience cannot be viewed from the perspective of transformative learning: future lawyers in USA, female immigrant entrepreneurs in Germany, leaders in business, girls in Pakistan, social workers, business students, Romanian Roma families in Italy, EU agricultural workers, US Military Academy students etc;

- The methods presented at the conference revealed the innovative, creative and vibrant methodical richness of transformative learning: Writing autobiography, fairy tales, educational drama, poems, metaphors, cartoons, satires, paintings, photo essays, narrative interviews, somatic learning, unanticipated diagnosis - some of them were described in the papers and discussed at the conference, the others were presented and demonstrated – participants had to act, perform, sing, paint, dance, mediate, tell stories...

Next conference will be held in San Francisco in autumn 2012. Having in mind the kind of challenges the modern world is facing and is about to face, one can really look forward to hear about the potentials of adult learning in coping with these changes, revealed in the framework of transformative learning theory.

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