

THEORIZING THE CONCEPT OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. *The concept of learning experience holds its eminent place within the paradigm of constructivism in contemporary educational science. The study process is being designed and construed to foster educative experiences in accordance with the desired learning outcomes. Transformative learning theory and the concept of perspective transformation marks a specific type of learning experience – one that reconstructs the frame of reference of the learner. Such a paradigmatic shift is also considered necessary for large-scale educational reforms to succeed. Transformative learning theory itself doesn't provide clear-cut solutions for implementation of a certain reform ideology, to the contrary – it questions the assumptions that guide one's action in order to construct a more inclusive, better informed and functional meaning perspective which may disagree with the assumptions that are imposed institutionally. As part of teacher professional development, transformative learning practices hold a promise for emancipation of the teaching profession and the development of agency. This article theorizes the concept of learning experience from the perspective of phenomenology and the theory of transformative learning, bringing forward the concept of transformative learning experience. The aim of the research is to explore the concept of transformative learning experience as an object of study within teacher professional development.*

Keywords: *learning experience, perspective transformation, teacher professional development, transformative learning experience.*

Introduction

The concept of learning experience holds its eminent place within the paradigm of constructivism in contemporary educational science. Study process is being designed and construed to foster educative experiences in accordance with the desired learning outcomes. In the context of ongoing educational reforms, the question of support for teacher professional development is at a disadvantage. An understanding has been reached about the importance of a fundamental support for the competence development of teachers and its complexity, which is stated in the publication of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Guerriero, 2017); however, there is no

universal model of development to strive for. In fact, there is no single best model of teaching and no ideal means of its evaluation. Diversity in teaching has been encouraged as a strength (European Commission, 2013). This article argues that teachers' experiences matter. To implement new types of teaching, teachers need learning experiences of their own that help them develop professionally.

Transformative learning theory and the concept of perspective transformation marks a specific type of learning experience – one that reconstructs the frame of reference of the learner. Such a paradigmatic shift is also considered necessary for large-scale educational reforms to succeed. Transformative learning theory itself doesn't provide clear-cut solutions to implement a certain reform ideology, to the contrary – it questions the assumptions and expectations that guide one's action in order to construct a more inclusive, better informed and functional meaning perspective which may disagree with the assumptions that are imposed institutionally. However, as part of teacher professional development, transformative learning practices hold a promise for emancipation of the teaching profession and the development of transformative agency, which in turn is paramount for innovative school-based curriculum design and conceptual problem solving.

This article theorizes the concept of learning experience from the perspective of phenomenology and the theory of transformative learning, bringing forward the concept of transformative learning experience. The aim of the research is to explore the concept of transformative learning experience as an object of study within teacher professional development.

The concept of experience

Learning experience, despite its frequent use in educational discourse, often appears to be treated as an axiomatic notion. In order to construct learning experience as a research category, its grounds must be examined.

In John Dewey's philosophy of education, experience is theorized as a critical aspect of progressive education. He emphasizes: "Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into" (Dewey, 1997, p. 38). Therefore, Dewey stresses the responsibility of the educator to discern conductive or detrimental aspects of the experiences undergone by the learner.

In Dewey's work experience is interpreted as a biologically determined model of continuous interaction between living creatures and their environment (Eldridge, 1998), where equal weight is given to both objective and internal conditions that shape the experience. Experience resembles consciousness, but it is more than that – it also includes interaction with the environment and its

consequences. Dewey remarks that the educative value of an experience is restricted by any obstacles to perceiving the relationship between action and its consequence, the enacted and the undergone (Dewey, 1980). Dewey's model implies that experience grows and takes on meaning and as a model of interaction with the world it may be modified, improved, reconstructed. It is through inquiry that experience becomes self-regulatory. It is a prospective and process-oriented understanding of experience.

Dewey sets forth continuity and interaction as criterions to depict experience as a phenomenon, arguing that the linkage between continuity and interaction provides its educative value to an experience. The concept of continuity characterises both the continuity of perception and succession, the connection between the influence every experience has on the quality of the successive experiences and the attributes it has taken on from the previous ones (Dewey, 1997). This also marks the retrospective aspects of experience – causal linkage, succession and impact of historical experience.

The criterion of interaction is characterised by amounts of social richness as experience is social in its nature. Societal endeavours are saturated by the heritage of previous generations and epochs; therefore, culture encompasses the experience of an individual. Dewey sets forth an imperative not to adopt uncritically the inherited aspects of culture, but to reconstruct it, expose to inquiry and discussion (Dewey, 1997). Dewey saw the democratic self-transforming society as an ideal, so he advocated cultural instrumentalism – the possibility to transform culture through means of experience and intelligence, philosophical reflection and criticism (Eldridge, 1998).

Peter Jarvis regards experience as occurring at the intersection of the inner world of the self and the outside world, which he calls the birthplace of learning (Jarvis, 2006). He argues that we learn only from experiences that have been internalized, noting that the perceived outside stimuli must come to awareness at some point to form recallable experiences, may those be primary (direct) or secondary (mediated) experiences (Jarvis, 2010). It is considered that secondary experiences dominate in formal education.

In developmental science experience may be understood as a coaction of an organism and its environment, noting the profound effects specific learning experiences may have on the development of an individual. It has been discerned that experience has cumulative effects on development (Marshall, 2015). Research in neuroscience confirms that experiences of action/activity alter brain structure and function throughout the lifespan (Lickliter & Honeycutt, 2015), which points to the important role of habit.

Philosophic tradition of phenomenology studies consciousness, the structures of experience and human subjectivity, opposing a reductionistic view in studies of the essence of phenomena (Kūle & Kūlis, 1998). It holds a view

that if a mental phenomenon exists in the consciousness of a person, it has a value, meaning and a function. Phenomenology explores the problem of constitution – relationships between reality and mind, consciousness and true existence (Huserls, 2002).

Phenomenology as a research methodology has proved to be a fruitful approach for the analysis of how meaning is constructed in the social reality. In this tradition, it is believed that meaning is constructed in a pre-predicative level and a subjective experience may not be fully expressed in words. Reality is not reducible to linguistic representations; therefore, predications are representations of experience and may not be treated as experience itself in research. A subjective sense of the observable actions is not directly accessible to the observer. The interpretation of experience depends on the point of view – the very same experience may be described differently by the actor himself/herself, an everyday observer or a social scientist. There is a distinction between *lived experience* as the primary grasp of a phenomenon in the actors' senses, feelings and reactions and experiences as interpretations, notions and causations (Eberle, 2014). *Lived experience* therefore unfolds as a direct, unmediated, current multimodal experience of an individual within a certain point in time, but *experiences* constitute the processed perceptions that have been interpreted to a certain degree, that have formed memories of the experienced events and therefore also involve reduction. Research shows that there may be a significant divergence between the conceptions and subjective evaluation during an experienced event and retrospective evaluations, where the emotional colour of the conclusion of the event may distort the memory significantly (Miron-Shatz, Stone, & Kahneman, 2009).

Experience is constituted contextually, and the concept of *lifeworld* represents the sphere of experience formation and comprehension (Huserls, 2002; Kūle & Kūlis, 1998). Lifeworld is the cultural framework of an experience constitution (Jarvis, 2010). It frames the surroundings of an individual, it is the facet of the world that one has become familiar with and has interiorised. Therefore, if something has not entered an individual's lifeworld (become part of his or her experience), he or she finds it incomprehensible, ungraspable. An individual's experience is characterised by the network of interrelations, ideas and events that have formed one's identity, that has influenced one as a personality, a professional, an adult. It is a comprehensively biographical scope of experience.

Lifeworld reveals itself as both personal and intersubjective, where the notion of self is being constructed in the social sphere (Huserls, 2002). It is the background of communicative action. This marks the significance of an individual's lifeworld, consequently his/her experience and development in the process of learning, enhancement of professional competence and formation of

operational concepts as well as that of assumptions and beliefs. The scope of one's lifeworld may be characterised by the notions of horizon and point of view, where change in one's positionality may result in a changed perspective (Finlayson, 2005).

A temporally distant account of an experience may be considered to be a *conceptualization of experience*; among other things it reveals the perspective through which an individual interprets new experience. In the following pages, this article will describe a specific type of experience – transformative learning which is connected to efforts of improving professional activity.

Transformative learning experience

As there are numerous learning theories, the concept of learning experience may carry different meanings for different theoretical perspectives. According to a general cognitively focused definition of learning, it is “an enduring change in behaviour, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience” (Schunk, 2012, p. 3). Consequently, change is involved in any learning, it must endure over time and it occurs through experience which in turn is affected by the characteristics of a specific environment. This definition also implies that learning may be expected to result in action. At the same time, it does not maintain that the nature of learning is necessarily positive, which allows us to think that learning may also be regressive, deformed or defensive.

One of the most prominent comprehensive definitions of learning belongs to Knud Illeris. Through the analysis of numerous perspectives on learning, he defines learning as “any process that in living organisms leads to permanent capacity change and which is not solely due to biological maturation or ageing” (Illeris, 2007, p. 3). According to Illeris, learning in general is composed of two processes – interaction with the environment (social, cultural or material) and an internal, mental process of acquisition which necessarily includes interplay between the learning content and the incentive function.

Illeris has developed a heuristic typology of learning based on the extent of change generated in mental structures (mental schemes and patterns): cumulative, assimilative, accommodative, transformative/expansive (Illeris, 2009). *Cumulative* or mechanical learning denotes the establishment of new mental schemes or patterns, which are rather isolated formations. This type of learning dominates in the first years of life. *Assimilative* learning is the most common type of learning and refers to learning by addition, complementing the already established schemes or patterns. *Accommodative* or transcendent learning refers to the modification of an existent mental scheme or pattern in order to link in a new kind of experience that doesn't initially fit in the mental

model constructed by the individual. This kind of learning implies that the old scheme is being relinquished or reconstructed to get hold of a new understanding. Finally, the type of learning associated with major structural changes, according to Illeris, is *transformative* learning, in other theories known also as significant learning, expansive learning or transitional learning. It denotes a simultaneous restructuring of a cluster of schemes and patterns, resulting in a transformed meaning perspective and personality-integrated knowledge development. It is considered the most demanding type of learning. Accordingly, the concept of transformative experience denotes a venture through such kind of learning.

Jack Mezirow, who introduced the concept in 1978, defines transformative learning as “the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change. Such frames are better because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 92). The notion of a problematic frame of reference expresses the idea of discrepancy between what is experienced or encountered and one’s meaning perspective that guides their understanding and acting. We constitute the meaning of our experience through this frame that we have developed over our lifetime – through our experiences, knowledge, impressions, preconceptions and assumptions, which often may prove to be incomplete and adopted unknowingly. This discrepancy may manifest itself as a disorienting dilemma – an event or a situation that highlights incompleteness or distortedness of our understanding. It may trigger what is called transformative learning.

Transformative learning theory is rooted in humanism, critical social theory, emancipatory pedagogy and constructivist assumptions (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Mezirow, 1991). It may be considered not only a theory of personal transformation, but also as a theory that provides an insight into the mechanisms of cultural change and paradigm shift, which in turn is achieved through individuals. Since its foundation the theory of perspective transformation has undergone certain developments, unveiling a broader understanding of perspective transformation – both in processes and contexts which facilitate it (Cranton, 2016) and as typology of its course and results (Hoggan, 2016; Yacek, 2017).

We construe our experience through our subjective frame of reference that has been shaped through interpretations of sense perception, assessing its significance and building logical links between experiences. A frame of reference is a structure of culture and language, it includes cognitive, conative and affective components and is not limited to the conscious mind; it also affects processes outside awareness. A frame of reference has two dimensions – habits

of mind that broadly shape and delimit perception and form habituality of reasoning; and points of view that could be considered manifestations or articulations of habits of mind, such as belief statements, value judgements, attitudes or feelings. A point of view is more accessible to awareness as well as to feedback from others (Mezirow, 2009), therefore it may be considered more open to investigation whilst habits of mind are not directly accessible to the researcher. They may be inferred through expressed or enacted points of view.

Mezirow's initial 10-phase model of transformation has been debated; it is now generally believed that transformative learning occurs rather as a non-linear process – it can occur either as an epochal, sudden reorientation or it may be a cumulative process. Mezirow states that most of transformative learning comes about outside awareness, where intuition takes the place of critical reflection on assumptions (Mezirow, 2009). He has also described 5 indispensable prerequisites for transformative learning to occur: a) critical reflection on assumptions in one's own thinking or that of others; b) determining the validity of a truth claim via empirical research; c) free participation in dialectical discourse that serves as grounds to validate a judgement socially; d) enacting the new, transformed perspective; e) a certain disposition that allows oneself to become critical and examine assumptions (one's own as well as those of others), follow it through and reconstruct these assumptions, act on them and possibly transform one's frame of reference (Mezirow, 2009). Interestingly, in his recapitulation of the theory disorienting dilemma was not mentioned as a prerequisite to transformative learning although it was believed to trigger it (Mezirow, 1991), which may be justified by the fact that the contemporary life offers enough dilemmas and contradictions to solve as well as the possibility of the activation event taking place outside the awareness and progressing cumulatively.

Transformative learning is believed to be fundamentally intersubjective, calling for the presence of respect and recognition. These are preconditions for both self-realization, autonomy, critical reflection, participation in critical discourse and attempting perspective transformation. Thereby the need for recognition is inextricably linked to empowerment efforts (Hoggan, Mälkki, & Finnegan, 2017; West, Fleming, & Finnegan, 2013). In its essence, transformative learning may be defined as necessarily emancipatory, aiming at the resolution of contradictions and discrepancies and development of a more critical, complete and functional meaning perspective. It might be tempting to employ this understanding of learning to implement certain policies, for instance in education. However, the concept of transformative learning is incompatible with an unquestioned implementation of a certain ideology within the target group, which must be rejected as characteristic to cultural invasion and therefore

unethical. At the same time, critical reflection on assumptions of an ideology may contribute to a more thorough understanding of the situation.

Transformative learning practices hold an opportunity to develop integrative praxis via resolving inherent contradictions, discrepancies and conceptual problems as well as challenging dominating ideologies and fighting for social justice. It can therefore be considered a means of emancipation of the profession. It must be noted that the situation of a disorienting dilemma or a need state contains no automaticity of desirable resolution – it may progress either expansively or regressively (Engeström, 1987). Transformative learning is believed to be more likely if the participation is voluntary (Mezirow, 1991); learning motivation that results in a transformed frame of reference cannot be imposed (Illeris, 2007).

Researchers also stress the responsibility of a facilitator who has to take into consideration the possible negative effects a challenged frame of reference may bring upon the learner (Hoggan et al., 2017), such as tension, anxiety, confusion, cognitive, social and emotional struggles, disorganization and possibly even social exclusion due to a challenged state of affairs. Transformation is one of the scenarios in a situation of a challenged perspective – one may take an expansive position and take time for introspection and critical reflection or they may take up a defensive (including psychological defence mechanisms) or even regressive position to seek refuge from the unknown. If the challenged assumptions are connected to an individual's professional identity and organization of professional activity, it challenges also the justification of former actions and may be devastating to the individual. Therefore support, respect and recognition are of great value to help resolve the tension and reconstruct meaning perspectives to regain coherence.

Transformative learning as a recognisable process is typically initiated in a crisis-like situation and concludes with a sense of relief (Illeris, 2003), self-integration (Hoggan et al., 2017) and a new sense of agency (Hoggan, 2016). We face discrepancies daily and deliberately or intuitively evaluate the need to address and analyse them. Crisis-like situations reveal the progress and extent of the transformation, because it is impossible to avoid addressing them. What makes the difference is the strategies one applies and what are their internal and external resources for a resolve. In a context of professional development, that marks a priority to facilitate situations and support mechanisms that promote a resolution over a mere creation of disorienting situations. It is quite clear that an activity such as teaching practice inherently contains enough dilemmas, double binds, discrepancies and contradictions, therefore no artificially generated dilemmatic situations need to be provided. After all, meaning schemes and frames of reference have a formative and stabilizing function. Learning activities that bring opportunities to identify, analyse and resolve or mitigate

these contradictions and promote an exploration of diverse views, on the other hand, may prove to be more beneficial.

Transformative education is believed to require stepping outside the habitual ways of thinking (Mezirow, 2012). Steven Brookfield states that the only way to overcome a one-dimensional way of thinking (i.e., instead of criticizing a system while submitting to it, engage in improving it) for an adult learner is to get acquainted with a fundamentally different perspective (Brookfield, 2005). Patricia Cranton, too, emphasizes the role of encountering different views and opinions to partake in a critical self-reflection. She suggests provoking dialogue from different viewpoints and learning activities that are structured in a way that helps identify and explore alternative perspectives (Cranton, 2016). From a phenomenological point of view, varied experiences may serve the purpose of expanding one's lifeworld and therefore also broadening one's perspective.

Transformative learning may be viewed from at least two perspectives: a) an endless quest for a more complete and functional perspective; b) transformation of a comparably dysfunctional perspective when discrepancies and contradictions have accumulated. The latter understanding could be more useful in the context of professional development and solution of problems of practice. In the expansive learning theory of Yrjö Engeström important aspects of learning are agency building and concept formation; an activity system and its developments is used as the primary unit of analysis (Engeström, 1987). Change laboratory method within the framework of cultural-historical activity theory depicts a model of how a new concept of an activity system may be generated through analysis of contradictions and through the cycle of expansive learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). The theory of expansive learning may prove complementary in understanding and facilitating the processes of transformative learning in a workplace environment. The activity of teaching in its collective nature calls for transformative learning that is not exclusively located in the individual domain.

Conclusions

The concept of experience depicts a model of continuous interaction between an organism and its environment as well as its consequences and its subjective recollection. Affected by the surrounding social richness and culture, a person's experience grows and takes on meaning, shaping and influencing the quality of successive experiences and his/her development. Lifeworld represents the cultural background and the sphere of intersubjective experience formation of an individual or a group; it also describes the scope of comprehension and diversity of encounters an individual has come across. From a

phenomenological point of view, varied experiences may serve the purpose to expand one's lifeworld and therefore also broaden one's perspective.

Learning is characterised by capacity change, it occurs through experience and is deeply affected by it. Transformative learning describes a kind of learning that involves major structural changes in an array of connected mental schemes and patterns or an individual; it results in a transformed meaning perspective (alternatively described as a frame of reference). This kind of learning is believed to be the most expansive, far reaching and explicitly demanding.

The emancipatory and empowering aspects of transformative learning are critical examination of assumptions and development of a more inclusive, informed and functional frame of reference. It may result in overthrow of imposed ideologies, solving conceptual problems and contradictions of practice, advancement of one's professional activity, sense of self integration or a new sense of agency. Transformative learning is believed to be triggered by a disorienting dilemma that constitutes the emergence of discrepancy between the comprehension constructed through the former meaning perspective of an individual and its inability to sufficiently explain an experience. Transformative learning requires stepping outside of the habitual ways of thinking, exploring alternative perspectives, applying critical reflection, participation in a dialectical discourse and developing a disposition to examine one's assumptions critically, following through to action.

In a context of teacher professional development, experiences of transformative learning might prove to be beneficial in resolving or mitigating contradictions in professional activity of teaching with a condition that situations and support mechanisms that promote a resolution and recognition to their learning needs are prioritized.

Transformative learning experiences should be studied in a retrospection through its conceptualizations, evaluations and reflections by the subjects of research. It is impossible to grasp lived experience, therefore it may be studied and inferred through expressed or enacted points of view.

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