**Overview of Transformative Learning**

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**Please note**: The following represents highlights of transformative learning, primarily a theory developed by Jack Mezirow, but expanded or viewed differently by many others in many other professional fields.

1. **Meaning Perspectives**

Assumptions acquired over the lifetime from family, friends culture, experiences.

**The Beginning of the Transformative Learning Process**

2. **Disorienting dilemma**

An experience or encounter with that causing us to reconsider our assumptions

If we cannot assimilate the new experience, we either reject it or begin to change

our assumptions

3. **Critical reflection**

Primarily a self-assessment of our assumptions and whether we are willing to

consider the new experience as offering truth or an enlightened perspective.

Critical reflection may not be a lone activity. Someone or others may be helpful in stimulating critical reflection regarding the disorienting dilemma and offer new insights that help resolve that which is incongruous or dissonant.

4. **Rational discourse**

Using language as the tool to shape the new idea with others. The new experience begins to take shape in reality and others help us see perspectives or aspects that we might not be able to observe on our own.

**5. Relevant experiences**

Testing out the new perspectives either alone or with others. Time may be an

important factor to fully integrate these as part of a new set of assumptions (new meaning perspective).

**6. A new frame of reference; a transformation**

Using a new set of assumptions or perspective that creates a change in behavior resulting in a different set of choices compared to those that would be made under previous assumptions. The frame of reference is the new set of guiding principles for making current and future choices. There are some researchers who have different notions about the continuous nature of the transformation, whether there could ever be a regression.

**The Transformation of Hugh Herr**

Considering the experience of Hugh Herr as an example of transformative learning\*

1. **Meaning Perspectives**

Higher education is not an option. Not academically oriented. Primary interest is mountain climbing.

**The Beginning of the Transformative Learning Process**

2. **Disorienting dilemma**

Climbing accident, loss of both legs, becoming disabled, being told that he will never climb again, finding prosthetic devices as exceptionally painful.

3. **Critical reflection**

Prediction by doctors questioned. Acceptance of pain questioned.

4. **Rational discourse**

(assumed)

**5. Relevant experiences**

Enrolling in college to address the disorienting dilemma, testing out abilities in subjects that have been problem areas in the past.

**6. A new frame of reference; a transformation**

Finding an undiscovered potential (exceptional academic ability in the sciences)

Using newly acquired skills to create device for other athletes

Mountain climbing as one of several important pursuits

Reaching out to the public to inspire others (TED Talks)

* Certainly the full experience of Mr. Herr was much more complicated; however, those noted above are public knowledge and appear to be characteristic of transformative learning.

**Transformative Learning and Outcomes\***

**Various researchers see various potential outcomes.**

**Adaptive Capacity**

“In essence, it [transformative learning] offers an explanation for adult development, that of developing a greater adaptive capacity to capitalize and act on prior knowledge and experience through critical reflection.” (Taylor, 1998). There may be a new perspective that self is no longer viewed as completely defined but entering a process of continuous becoming.

**New Meaning Perspectives**

Barriers may now be seen as pathways. Ideas formerly rejected are now considered and explored. New potential may be discovered that may previously have been seen as a weakness. Previously chosen pathways may be replaced with entirely new pathways. Relationships may be reconfigured and prioritized based upon new shared perspectives. There may be an entirely new set of values or principles that are applied in making major life choices.

**Personal Growth**

Psychological issues may be resolved. There may be an integration of personality that fosters new feelings of satisfaction and peace. Personal growth may lead to better relationships with others.

**Commitment Outside of Personal Goals**

Often characteristic of transformative learning is a new outward-looking perspective. There is less focus upon self and personal goals and a more inclusive commitment to social or societal concerns. There may be a major societal commitment to liberate the oppressed.

**Intentional Pathways**

There may be less of a sense of being controlled by one’s surroundings, but a new sense of control of one’s course in life.

\* Possible learning outcomes may vary dramatically from person to person. The particular outcome is a function of the catalyst that triggered the transformative learning experience (e.g., the specific “disorienting dilemma,” or perhaps other sources that may bring the disorienting dilemma or the new perspectives into view: an individual, an idea, a concept or philosophy, an experience, etc.)

References

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