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Abstract: Mezirow wrote that transformative learning is the most significant developmental task for adults. But how can adult educators know the degree to which their efforts to help learners transform their perspectives are successful? As part of a larger study of transformative learning for nursing home employees, this literature review sought to discover the ways in which perspective transformation has been operationalized and measured in recent empirical research. Literature for the review included 51 studies conducted between 1999 and 2009. The vast majority (43 out of 51) used qualitative research strategies. The remaining studies used quantitative strategies or mixed methods. Some of the authors used Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning as their framework; others used theories of perspective transformation or related terminology from other social science disciplines. Assessments were based on similarities between study outcomes and the overall concepts associated with Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, general concepts specific to a different theoretical framework, or on numerical scores generated by an instrument. The paper concludes with a discussion of the feasibility of using transformative learning theory as a framework for measuring perspective transformation in nursing home employees and creating a standardized instrument to measure perspective transformation in adult learners.

Introduction

In the field of adult education, transformative learning involves learners critically reflecting on their assumptions and then either changing their perspectives or consciously deciding to maintain their previous views (see Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2008). According to Mezirow (1991), transformative learning is the most significant developmental task for adults. But how can adult educators know the degree to which their efforts to help learners transform their perspectives are successful? How can researchers compare their results across studies? How can educators and consultants compare their results across interventions? What can we learn from other academic disciplines in terms of measuring perspective transformation? Is there a quantitative tool that could be used to assess transformative learning within large organizations? In preparation for a study of transformative learning for nursing home employees, I sought answers to these questions by reviewing recent literature to find out which methodological approaches researchers have used to study perspective transformation and how researchers have operationalized perspective transformation in their studies.

Methodology

To be included in the literature review, the studies must have attempted to empirically measure or describe transformative learning, perspective transformation, or some other aspect of transformation in adults. Purely theoretical or normative publications on new approaches to transformative learning, ways in which transformative learning might be fostered, how learning
facilitators can incorporate transformative learning into their curriculum, and the like were eliminated. Articles that dealt with perspective transformation within cognitive, affective, or behavioral realms that closely resembled Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning, even if they did not mention Mezirow or transformative learning theory by name, were included because different social science disciplines often use different terminology and models for similar phenomena. Search terms therefore included “Mezirow,” “transformative learning,” “transformational learning,” “transformative learning theory,” “transformational learning theory,” “perspective transformation,” and “transformation.” I searched the following databases: Academic Search Complete, ERIC (at EBSCOhost), EBSCO Electronic Journal Services, PsycINFO, PsycArticles, Sociological Collection, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Professional Development Collection, Electronic Theses and Dissertations (University of Georgia), MedLine, ProQuest Nursing and Allied Health Source, PubMed, Health Source: Nursing /Academic Edition, and AgeLine. Special attention was paid to studies of perception transformation in the aging and health sciences because my proposed research will be conducted within these fields. I also identified relevant references from Taylor’s (2007) critical review of transformative learning research between 1999-2005. To narrow the search results, I focused on research published between 1999 and 2009.

Results

The literature review produced a total of 51 studies that attempted to empirically measure or describe perspective transformation. This section of the paper will describe the research strategies used in the studies and the ways in which researchers operationalized perspective transformation. Emphasis is on quantitative and mixed methods as these are the most promising for large-scale assessment of interventions.

Research Strategies Used in Empirical Studies of Perspective Transformation

Qualitative strategies. The vast majority of studies in the literature review (43 out of 51) used qualitative research strategies. Conrad, Haworth, and Lattuca (2001) divide qualitative research strategies into seven categories: ethnography, case study, phenomenology, narrative methods, grounded theory, participatory action research, and practitioner/teacher research. Examples of all seven types of qualitative research were present in the literature. Case study was the most prevalent. This type of qualitative research provides “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1988, p. 21) and encourages the reader to compare the subject of inquiry with their own experience and understanding and take an active role in thinking about how the case might generalize to other populations (Merriam, 2001, p. 194). The next most common qualitative strategies, in order of prevalence, were phenomenology, narrative methods, ethnography, participatory action research, practitioner/teacher research, and grounded theory.

Quantitative strategies. Seven of the studies identified in the literature review employed quantitative research strategies exclusively. Only one of them used what could be called a generic measure of transformative learning based specifically on transformative learning theory. Based on constructs from Mezirow’s (1991) model of transformative learning, and Mezirow’s definition of reflective thinking within the model, Kember, Leung, Jones, Like, McKay, Sinclair, Tse, Webb, Wong, and Yeung (2000) designed a 16-question, four-scale questionnaire to measure “the extent to which students engage in reflective thinking in professional preparation courses” (p. 392). Their quantitative instrument assessed four constructs: habitual action,
understanding, reflection, and critical reflection. Questionnaire items about habitual action and reflection inquired about the respondent’s learning and reflection patterns in general. Items about understanding addressed the specific course in questions. Items about critical reflection asked questions about perspective change. These included: “As a result of this course I have changed the way I look at myself,” “This course has challenged some of my firmly held ideas,” “As a result of this course I have changed my normal way of doing things,” and “During this course I discovered faults in what I previously believed to be right” (p. 395). The authors purposely excluded from the instrument the affective dimension of reflective thinking. The “Reflection Questionnaire” was demonstrated to be reliable (Cronbach alpha ≥ .62) and valid through testing with undergraduate and graduate students in the health sciences (Kemper et al., 2000).

The rest of the studies used instruments that provided indirect evidence of perspective transformation through measures of various aspects of cognitive, affective, or behavioral change. Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, and Casey (2001) administered the Professional Values Scale, a 17-question survey that used a seven-part Likert scale to measure values and attitudes along four dimensions—commitment/affiliation, autonomy, knowledge/theory, and holistic perspective—to measure perspective transformation in nursing students obtaining their degree by distance education. To “assess the impact of a palliative care educational component on the attitudes toward care of the dying in undergraduate nursing students,” Mallory (2003) used the Frommelt Attitude Toward Care of the Dying scale, a 30-item instrument with a five-part Likert-type scale to measure nurses’ attitudes toward providing care for terminally ill patients and their families (p. 306). Goldie, Schwartz, McConnachie, and Morrison (2004) used the Ethics and Health Care Survey Instrument “to judge the impact of an integrated medical curriculum, in which ethics and law is a core vertical theme, on students’ potential behaviour when facing ethical dilemmas” (p. 943). Ligon, Ehlman, Moriello, and Welleford (2009) used visual analogue scales to measure changes in attitudes of undergraduate students toward older adults and aging after completion of an oral history project in an introductory gerontology class. To assess the “effectiveness of a university intergenerational service learning course on positively impacting students’ knowledge and perceptions of aging,” Knapp and Stubblefield (2000) combined two scales, the Facts on Aging Quiz I and the Facts on Aging Quiz II, to create a 50-item, true/false/don’t-know instrument to assess students’ knowledge of basic physical, mental, and social facts about aging. Brown (2005) used the Cultural and Educational Issues Survey (Version B), comprising four demographic items and 59 opinion statements with a 5-point Likert scale, to measure the effects of an alternative, transformative pedagogy on preservice educational administrators’ attitudes concerning cultural and educational issues.

**Mixed methods.** Three studies combined qualitative and quantitative research strategies to understand perspective transformation. To evaluate the nature of, and contributors to, transformative learning in adult learners of English as a Second Language, King (2000) adapted the Learning Activities Survey–ESL Format instrument, a four-page instrument that included objective and free response questions related to the students’ experiences and to specific aspects of transformative learning theory. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 24 of the 208 survey respondents “to augment the survey data with further inquiry and to evaluate the initial analysis of the data that had been gathered” (King, 2000, p. 73).

In a later study, the same author sought to understand the trends, changes, influences, facilitating factors, and barriers related to transformative learning for educators and their professor (King, 2004). To accomplish this, she administered the Learning Activities Survey to gather information from the research participants (King, 2004). The four-page survey included
“statements that describe the different stages of perspective transformation followed by free-
response questions that allow respondents to describe the experience/s they consider applicable”
(King, 2004, p. 158) and “a series of objective questions with checklists, multiple choice, and
fill-in-the-blanks to gather information about demographics and what may have facilitated the
participants’ transformative learning experiences” (King, 2004, p. 158). In addition, King (2004)
interviewed the professor and used constant comparison to analyze the transcribed data.

Keith (2005) “investigated whether individuals would change their views of nursing
facilities in response to volunteer activities in an ombudsman program and identified factors
associated with transitions in perceptions as well as types of change” by using a questionnaire
with one qualitative and several quantitative items (p. 125). Quantitative items included
demographic information; numeric and yes-no questions about length of service and training
received; five-point Likert-type questions to assess commitment to advocacy activities, strain
experienced as a volunteer, positive effects of volunteering on other aspects of life, effectiveness
of managing residents’ complaints; and a yes-no question about whether the volunteering in the
ombudsman program had changed their view of long-term care facilities (Keith, 2005). If
respondents’ perceptions had changed, they were asked to describe in what ways their
perceptions and views had changed.

Operationalizing Perspective Transformation

For authors who based their studies on transformative learning theory, their conclusions
about the existence and degree of perspective change were based on general similarities between
their study outcomes and the overall concepts associated with transformative learning. For
example, in a study of changing perspectives on issues of diversity in education, Brown (2005)
explained Mezirow’s transformative learning theory within her “Theoretical Framework” section
and then compared respondents’ pre-test and post-test answers on the Cultural and Educational
Issues Survey (Version B) instrument with aspects of transformative learning theory that she had
outlined earlier. For a study of the transformative learning that results from incorporating
HIV/AIDS into one’s identity, Baumgartner (2002) spent approximately three pages describing
the process of transformative learning and previous studies of the transformation process and
then analyzed her results by looking for evidence of transformative learning and the
transformation process in the narratives she had collected. Kember et al.’s (2000) study of
reflective thinking, a very specific aspect of transformative learning, was the most specific in its
operationalization. To assess critical reflection, the authors asked four questions:

4. As a result of this course I have changed the way I look at myself.
8. This course has challenged some of my formerly held ideas.
12. As a result of this course I have changed my normal way of doing things.
16. During this course I discovered faults in what I had previously believed to be
right. (p. 395)

Even these specific items allowed room for interpretation, however, as the questions were
open-ended.

Authors who studied perspective transformation within other theoretical frameworks
based their conclusions on general concepts specific to the framework or on numerical scores
generated by an instrument. Knapp and Stubblefield (2000) looked for statistical differences in
pre-test and post-test scores on the Facts on Aging Quiz I (FAQI) and Facts on Aging Quiz II
(FAQII) as evidence of general changes in attitude toward aging. MacLeod, Parkin, Pullon, and
Robertson (2003) looked for illustrative examples, themes, and patterns in written reflections and
class assignments for evidence of transformation of students’ perceptions of and attitudes toward caring for dying patients and their families.

**Conclusion**

Since Mezirow introduced the theory of transformative learning three decades ago, this topic has become the most widely discussed and widely researched in the field of adult education (Taylor, 2008). Empirical research has been conducted along the way in an attempt to define and measure transformative learning, but to date, there is not a single, widely accepted strategy or instrument that would allow researchers to more easily compare results across studies or that would justify the use of specific interventions for perspective transformation. The results of the literature review confirmed that transformative learning theory is an appropriate framework through which to study transformative learning for nursing home employees because it has been used effectively for similar research in clinical settings before. The quantitative instrument used by Kember et al. (2000) holds potential for measuring cognitive and behavioral aspects of reflective thinking and perspective transformation within Mezirow’s (as cited in Kember et al., 2000) model of transformative learning. For my research purposes, however, measuring change in employees’ affect as a result of transformative learning activities is also essential. Thus, it would be necessary to combine Kember et al.’s (2000) Reflective Questionnaire with an additional instrument to fully capture the perspective transformation hoped for. Perhaps because perspective transformation happens on so many levels (e.g., individual, organizational, cognitive, affective, behavioral), it may be impossible to develop a single, generic scale to capture every aspect. Rather, a more useful approach would be to use instruments that are specific to the type of change sought.

**References**


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