A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Literature—Unresolved Issues

Since 1978 the theory of transformative learning, as defined by Jack Mezirow (1978a,b; 1981; 1989; 1990; 1991a,b; 1992; 1994a,b; 1995; 1996, 1997), has stimulated much discussion and analysis in the field of adult education. This scrutiny has generally manifested itself in two forms, that of theoretical critique and empirical study. Unfortunately, most of the published discussion of Mezirow’s work has been predominantly theoretical critiques and the empirical studies have been generally available only as dissertations or conference proceedings (Taylor 1995; 1997a). Furthermore, most of the empirical studies focus on the model and the inherent components of a perspective transformation, whereas the theoretical critiques center on issues related to transformative learning underlying constructs about learning. Rarely have these two forms of inquiry been explored in concert with each other, reflecting on how each together informs our understanding the nature of transformative learning. It is the intent of this section of the monograph to do just that, identify and discuss the major theoretical and empirical tensions associated with transformative learning theory. More specifically, seven areas of contention emerge from the literature:

- Individual change vs. social action
- Decontextualized view of learning
- Universal model of adult learning
- Adult development: shift or progression
- An emphasis on rationality
- Other ways of knowing
- Perspective transformation: the model

Before beginning this section it is important to understand how the studies were selected for this review and their overall strengths and
Over 44 studies were selected, each of them focusing on Mezirow’s transformative learning theory directly (for a more in-depth explanation of selection criteria refer to Taylor 1997a). This purposeful sample of studies allowed for a more consistent interpretation, whereby all the studies were critiqued within a shared framework. The strengths of these studies are (1) the large number that have been brought together in this monograph and the consistency of their findings about the issues identified; and (2) the predominance of dissertations, which generally involve a rigorous review by a committee of experienced colleagues. On the other hand there are limitations: (1) they are predominantly qualitative, limiting their generalizability; (2) most were carried out in retrospect, where participants reflected back on their transformative experience, as opposed to observing and recording the learning experience as it was actually happening; and (3) most failed to review previous studies involving transformative learning theory, offering little critique of each other’s work. Regardless of their strengths or weakness, these studies move the discussion of transformative learning theory to a new level, that of the empirical in conjunction with the theoretical, offering not a finality to the discussion, but a new perspective and a more in-depth understanding about a profound movement in the study of adult learning.

In this section the first issues discussed focus predominantly on the theoretical framework of transformative learning theory whereas later the focus is specifically on unresolved issues associated with the model of a perspective transformation. Also, each section is followed by a collection of reflective notes and questions with the intent to situate the theoretical in the practical. My hope is that, with an identification of unresolved issues, the practitioner of transformative pedagogy will be better informed about the underlying assumptions of transformative learning theory and how they can be explored within the context of fostering transformative learning.

Individual vs. Social Change

The most controversial issue concerning transformative learning theory has been its relationship to social action and power (Collard and Law 1989; Cunningham 1992; Griffin 1987; Hart 1990; Newman 1993, 1994). Much of the problem begins with Mezirow’s attempt to fuse transformative learning with the epistemology of
Habermas' critical learning theory. In particular, it is the emphasis on social change framed within Habermas' epistemology of emancipatory knowing, that of knowledge derived from humankind's desire to achieve emancipation from domination. However, Collard and Law (1989) see it as “the lack of a coherent, comprehensive theory of social change, a lack diffused throughout the internal structure of this theory, evident in his selective interpretation and adaptation of Habermas, and partially dependent on problems within Habermas' own work” (p. 102). More specifically, it is the emphasis on transformation of the individual within the context of social action. “Perspective transformation appears to focus on the individual examining her or his own personal experience... about understanding and changing oneself... [and accepting] a reintegration by the individual into a society where the dominant ideology may go unquestioned” (Newman 1993, p. 229). This emphasis allows for a greater detachment from the inherent political and social action associated with emancipatory education. Furthermore, it seems that Mezirow is attempting to locate emancipatory education within the context of a liberal democratic system, thus not recognizing the sociopolitical critique from which emancipatory education was given birth. It is “his failure to address adequately questions of context, ideology, and the radical needs embodied in popular struggles [that] denies perspective transformation the power of emancipatory theory” (Collard and Law 1989, pp. 105-106). Furthermore, in Coffman's (1989, 1991) study on the promotion of inclusive language and perspective transformation among seminary students, she found that Mezirow “does not adequately accommodate the possibility of the transformation of society based on the perspective transformation of individuals who are members of a group” (1991, p. 52). It is the transformation within a group context that gives individuals more courage to initiate social change within new communities.

In response, Mezirow (1989) believes that the choice of social action resides with the learner. It is dependent upon whether the distortions that are being critically reflected upon are of an individual or sociocultural nature and it is not that he fails to recognize collective and social transformation, but instead, sees it as a separate entity from individual transformation. “Transformative learning is profoundly intersubjective, but it is not exclusively group mediated” (p. 173). It is through focusing exclusively on sociocultural distortions that Mezirow is most critical. Furthermore, he believes it is important to recognize the variety of situations where transformative learning can take place outside the context of social action:
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There can be no simple linear relationship between transformative learning and social action; there are many kinds of transformative learning and many kinds of social action. Transformative learning experiences which result in changes that are epistemic and psychic may not logically lead to collective action at all and may only very indirectly be a product of a specific social practice or institutionalized ideology. (Mezirow 1989, p. 174)

Tennant (1993) supports Mezirow, because he believes “his theory is directed at the intersection of the individual and social” (p. 36), not just the individual as others advocate. He states that a perspective transformation is a change in perspective of the individual, not society, such that it “shifts the onus for social analysis onto the learner, so that it is grounded in the learner’s experience, rather than being a decontextualized theory of society generated by, and for, academe” (p. 37). However, Tennant does concur that Mezirow does not give enough attention to the influence of social forces and how they shape our lives, particularly concerning the social dimension of adult development.

Embedded in this issue of social dimension and transformative learning is a related force Mezirow overlooks, that of power. Hart (1990) is critical of transformative learning’s association with emancipatory education, in particular how Mezirow’s treatment of Habermas’ categories of learning (e.g., instrumental, communicative) “severs the systematic and intrinsic relationship of Habermas’ theory with a critique of power” (p. 126). She believes that Mezirow implies a power-free form of communication, and by doing so, fails to recognize the inherent distorting effect of power within communication that has to be addressed for critical reflection to take place. By framing his theory within Habermas’ learning domains, Mezirow takes on their conceptual baggage. “Whether he likes it or not, by employing these categories Mezirow takes over their meanings and connotations as well and therefore inevitably gets tangled up with the issue of power” (p. 128). It is Mezirow’s failure to recognize the power relations inherent in communication in conjunction with an educator that he places outside of a power-bound context that contradicts the practicality of transformative learning theory.

Mezirow does not respond formally to Hart, but in his later work he begins to recognize the distorted effect of power in communication, particularly in area of rational discourse. For example, he states that “there is no question of the claim that dialogue is often made impossible in a society structured by power and inequality and that
creating a forum in which participants have the right to speak is inadequate." (Mezirow 1995, p. 55). However, despite those challenges he does not believe they have to be eliminated for dialogue to lead to greater understanding, cooperation, tolerance, and respect. Instead of focusing on factors (e.g., power) that distort communication, he emphasizes the "ideals" of fostering rational discourse, because they provide a goal toward which we can strive and set a standard against which to evaluate our performance.

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The latter critiques shed light on the consequences of Mezirow using Habermas' work as a theoretical lens. He wants to situate transformative learning within an emancipatory framework, but at the same time his model seems to emphasize personal transformation to a greater extent than social transformation. This is not to say that he doesn't encourage the critical reflection of epistemic or sociolinguistic assumptions. However, he believes that not all transformations need lead to or involve social critique. Furthermore, he tends to focus on the ideal, overlooking the powerful social forces that can influence the fostering of transformative learning. I believe that this discussion is tremendously important to understanding the implications of practicing transformative pedagogy. Educators need to reflect on their own values about education and ask themselves what is the role of education—personal or social change? Can they be separated? Can we separate personal transformation from social critique? Can we teach in such a way that focuses on just the personal without focusing on the social dimension of learning? Should social change take precedence over the personal and who should decide?

**Decontextualized View of Learning**

A second unresolved issue with transformative learning theory has been its decontextualized view of adult learning and rational discourse (Clark and Wilson 1991). More specifically, in Mezirow's original research of women returning to school after a long hiatus, their "experiences were studied as if they stood apart from their historical and sociocultural context, thereby limiting our understanding of the full meaning of those experiences" (p. 78). Context
Context reflects the personal and sociocultural factors that play an influencing role in the process of transformative learning. Broadly speaking, these factors include the surroundings of the immediate learning event, made up of the personal and professional situation of the individual at that time and the more distant background context involving the familial and social history that has influenced the individual growing up (Clark 1991, 1992; Sveinunggaard 1993). Furthermore, in his decontextualization of rational discourse, he does not recognize its subjective nature framed within ongoing social, cultural, and historical conditions. As mentioned earlier, there is an imbalance in the theory, with too great an emphasis on the individual dimension and not enough on the social dimension:

Essentially Mezirow has attempted to remove the very element which brings meaning to experience. The theory itself, locating perspective transformation within the individual and predicated upon humanistic assumptions of a decisive, unified self, fails to explore the constitutive relationship between individuals and sociocultural, political, and historical contexts in which they are situated. Further, Mezirow proposes . . . a concept of rationality that is essentially ahistorical and decontextualized. (Clark and Wilson 1991, p. 90)

Clark and Wilson suggest that Mezirow needs to maximize instead of minimize the impact context has on the meaning and interpretation of experiences and recognize "rationality as theory-laden, value-driven, communally judgmental, and historically situated" (p. 90).

Mezirow's (1991b) initial response to Clark and Wilson (1991) is that they misinterpreted his viewpoints and at the same time he failed to communicate his ideas adequately. He believes they mistook his emphasis on greater self-direction and autonomy of the individual as a disregard for collaborative and cooperative social action. Furthermore, Mezirow believes their view of a decontextualized transformative learning theory is the result of a misinterpretation of his ideal conditions of rational discourse as contingencies, not as an attempt on his part to move "to a higher level of abstraction, not one which somehow seeks to transcend culture, but which identifies the essence of how our culture prescribes this process of learning" (Mezirow 1991b, p. 191). Also, these ideal conditions of rational discourse are ideal only as long as they are open to continued assessment and review.
Research on transformative learning tends to support Clark and Wilson’s conclusion concerning context and transformative learning. More specifically, the influence of personal contextual factors on a perspective transformation is found in what is referred to by other studies as a readiness for change (Bailey 1996; Hunter 1980; Pierce 1986; Van Nostrand 1992), the role of experience (Coffman 1989), prior stressful life events (Vogelsang 1993), and a predisposition for a transformative experience (Turner 1986). Taylor (1994), in his study on the transformative nature of intercultural competency, found that the participants “were ready for change due to former critical events, personal goals, or prior intercultural experiences” (p. 169).

This support is also seen by research on sociocultural contextual factors—background context inclusive of related historical and geographical influences—examined by Scott (1991a) as life histories; Eisinger (1995) as historical factors; Edwards (1997) as decontextualization; Elias (1993) as traditions and a legacy from childhood; and Schlesinger (1983) as the pretransition stage. A good example of the sociocultural nature of context is demonstrated by Olson and Kleine (1993) who found that prior high school experience of rural midlife college students influenced the nature of trigger events leading to college entry. Schlesinger (1983), in a study of the transition process of Jewish women entering the work force, found that women “felt that their changes had to be understood within the context of what their lives had been like before they began the entry process....Their early married years provide clues as to why they approached the transition bridge” (p. 85). Most important, this return to the work force was not a random event experienced by a few individuals, but it was indicative of a national trend in response to larger and more complex historical events. These studies seem to encourage a conception of learning, such as situated cognition, that is not bound by the narrow confines of the psychological, but instead, the construction of knowledge is situated personally and historically, “distributed—stretched over, not divided among—mind, body, activity, and cultural organized settings” (Lave 1988, p. 1).

Counter to the predicative and influential nature of context on transformative learning, Neuman (1996) saw a transformation as resulting in participants having the “ability to transcend their immediate and past context and its influence by challenging cultural norms, taking risks, and integrating critical types of reflection into their work and personhood” (p. 472). Furthermore, it involved visiting prior learning contexts and through critical reflection negating their ability to influence future action.
In a later publication Mezirow (1996) makes a more definitive effort to explain how context fits within transformative learning theory. He sees learning as “situated,” affected by social and cultural forces. Furthermore, it is important to understand how these forces, historically and biographically, shape our meaning perspectives and also our practice of testing our assumptions and acting on choices. In particular, he reflects on the role of personal and social factors and their impact on rational discourse. “These prevailing forces are of major significance to adult learning; they dictate whose voice shall have priority and who is permitted to be heard. In so doing, they can distort the ideal of full free participation in discourse.” (p. 168). And it is by focusing on the ideal conditions of learning that educators can transcend the communicative distortions created by personal and social contextual factors.

Even though Mezirow recognizes that adult learning is situated in a social context, he fails to maintain the connection between the construction of knowledge and the context within which it is interpreted. Learning needs to be seen as located in relations among humans, acting in specific settings, such that the setting and learning activities contribute to the definition of self and the structure of cognition (Wilson 1993). More specifically, this perspective could possibly provide insight into why some disorienting dilemmas lead to a perspective transformation and others do not. An in-depth investigation into the context of disorienting dilemmas may help reveal the social and tool dependent nature of a perspective transformation. This suggests that for a clearer understanding of a significant life event, such as a disorienting dilemma, “educators need take into account contextual factors because these shape the meaning of the learning by structuring it and directing its course” (Clark 1991, p. 152).
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The focus on context and its relationship to transformative learning reminds me that the students in my classroom are not learning in a vacuum. Their learning has been and is continually shaped and influenced by their personal experience and social and historical events of the day. Furthermore, the classroom itself is a context shaping the learning and cognition in its own way. The issue of context and learning raises the following questions: What is personally happening in my students’ lives that is affecting their learning experience? Historically, what is happening in society that could influence the learning in my classroom? What am I doing as an educator to recognize and take advantage of the contextual nature of learning? How can I shape the context of the classroom to help foster transformative learning?

Universal Adult Learning Theory

A third issue that builds upon the previous concern raised by Clark and Wilson (1991) is Mezirow’s (1991a) goal of developing a universal adult learning theory. On one hand Mezirow purports that “transformation theory seeks to elucidate universal conditions and rules that are implicit in linguistic competence or human development” (p. xiii), whereas on the other he cites Geertz’s notion of cultural determinism, whereby culture acts a template “for the organization of social and psychological processes, much as a genetic system provides such a template for the organization of organic processes” (Geertz 1973, p. 216). It would seem difficult to have it both ways, such that there are universalistic aspects of learning across culturally induced world views. Moreover, it is the autonomous and self-directed nature that permeates Mezirow’s (1997) world view: an emphasis on the individual orientation toward making meaning and the essentiality that the “individual” must be free to determine his or her own reality as opposed to mutually accepting the social realities defined by others.

This conundrum between a universalistic approach to learning and cultural determinism is further illuminated by the role Mezirow (1991a) sees that culture plays in human thought. He states that “culture can encourage or discourage transformative thought”
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(p. 3). This statement suggest that transformative learning is a process of learning to which all cultures should aspire, even though it is discouraged and inhibited by some. He makes reference to the essentiality of critical reflection in transformative learning, implying it is a “higher” form of learning not found in all individuals and cultures. Could not critical reflection be a way of learning that develops its essentiality based on the needs of the culture from which it evolved? Who, by what means, and from what cultural perspective decides the best “ways of knowing”? A response to these questions might be best answered by his latest article where he argues that critical reflection and rational discourse have proven themselves in more circumstances to work better at understanding the underlying assumptions of human communication (Mezirow 1998). He goes on to say:

Transformation theory does not hold that critical reflection and rational discourse represent some transcendental version of the eternal verities or are of an order of reality that transcends the empirical world of change, but simply that they have been found to work better in more circumstances than have other options. They are universal in the sense that discourse is predicated upon universal principles. From this vantage point, critical reflection, discourse, and rationality itself develops only as a consequence of inquiry. The alternatives to discourse involves basing understanding upon tradition, authority, or physical force. In cultures where the objective is to perpetuate a religion or a regime, or to produce a docile work force, critical reflection and discourse are commonly limited. (p. 188)

Unfortunately, the present empirical studies in transformative learning offer little that informs this debate. Few studies have designed the selection of their participants to ensure diverse perspectives (class, gender, race, ethnicity). Furthermore, of the few studies that did attempt to offer a cultural balance among participants (Bailey 1996; Elias 1993; Pope 1996), even fewer investigated the relationship of cultural differences to transformative learning theory.

Mezirow’s (1991a) theory of transformative learning seems to attempt to be all things to all people. He equates helping learners learn with acquiring more developmentally advanced meaning perspectives as the cardinal goal of adult education. This goal dilutes transformative learning theory as opposed to strengthening its role in understanding adult learning. Transformative learning theory like any other theory is a derivative of its creator’s own culture. A different culture may share transformative learning theory,
but it is culturally, socially, and historically contextualized based on the needs and views of learning within. In essence, learning is not to be perceived from a hierarchical perspective, but instead, one that is culturally based. “There is a need to recognize that theories are context specific” (Gallagher 1997, p. 114). Lastly, before linking transformative learning to other fields and cultures, it needs to be firmly established in its own right, as a viable theory of explaining how adults learn. This means that more hard research needs to be conducted in a variety of settings to validate the significance of its various premises (Taylor 1993).

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This idea of transformative learning as a universal model of adult learning begs the following questions: Should the goal of teaching be framed around one perspective of learning, that of transformative learning? Should all learning be about the promotion of transformative learning? Is it good teaching to promote a universal model of adult learning to a student body defined by an array of diverse positionalities (race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation)? How does transformative learning transcend cultural difference in the classroom? Whose interest am I serving by fostering transformative learning? If I choose to foster transformative learning from Mezirow’s perspective how do I account for and address the cultural differences among my students?

Adult Development: Shift or Progression

Mezirow has taken the position that perspective transformation parallels the process of adult development (1991a). This is based on the assumption that a perspective transformation reflects a developmental movement through a series of steps and phases by an individual away from a concrete, egocentric, context free, and nonreflective view of the world toward a more progressive developmental meaning perspective. However, Tennant (1993) would disagree, arguing the position that Mezirow does not “distinguish between ‘normative’ psychological development ( . . . life cycles or phases within a world view) . . . and the type of developmental shift implied by perspective transformation, which is more fundamentally transformative and involves some level of social critique
(. . . the questioning of a world view)” (p. 34). In essence, Mezirow does not recognize the socially constructed nature of development, such that there is a whole host of institutions, events, and regulations marking developmental stages of adulthood as well as those marked by age transitions in our society. “He needs to distinguish learning experiences and personal changes which are fundamentally transformative and emancipatory from those which are simply part of the social expectations associated with the different phases of life” (Tennant 1993, p. 39). Tennant sees the transformation of meaning schemes most closely associated with adult development. A perspective transformation, which always requires critical reflection, implies a developmental shift, whereas moving through normative life cycles of adulthood implies developmental progress.

Mezirow (1994) formally responds to Tennant by arguing that he is creating a false dichotomy between developmental shift and developmental progress. He would argue that “developmental progress occurs through ‘shifts’—transformations in both meaning schemes and meaning perspectives—toward the acquisition of meaning perspectives and schemes which are more inclusive differentiating, permeable, and integrative of experience” (p. 228). Mezirow also sees two paths of a perspective transformation, one that is epochal and the other that is incremental, further illustrating the interrelationship of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. The epochal path generally involves a major cataclysmic event (disorienting dilemma) in a person’s life that initiates a change in a meaning perspective. Although the incremental path involves revision of meaning schemes, cumulatively over time this results in a perspective transformation. Furthermore, Mezirow makes the premise that psychological codes can be separated from social codes (norms, language codes, ideologies, philosophies and theories), meaning that an individual can develop or transform due to a critique of the psychological without a critique of the social. This assumption seems to substantiate further the criticism of Mezirow not giving enough attention to the forces that socially constrain and act upon psychological development. “Ultimately education can lead to oppressive or liberatory change; the former domesticates learners by simply helping them to adjust to socially expected developmental tasks, while the latter assists them to fundamentally question their perspectives on the world and their place in it” (Tennant 1994, p. 235).
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What I think is most important to Tennant (1994) about the relationship between the process perspective transformation and adult development is not their difference, but the need for educators to embrace a developmental perspective of teaching. It means as an educator asking yourself and your students: What constitutes development? It means acknowledging the psychological nature of development, but as well the social construction of developmental events. Also, it means asking: What are the underlying cultural assumptions about development, for example, of being “an adult,” “being transformed,” “in midlife crisis,” and/or “being elderly?” Whose interest is being served by the different versions of these developmental markers? It also poses the challenge of what actions as an educator do I take to facilitate a developmental perspective in my classroom? Also, how do I address adequately students who come to my class at different developmental stages in their lives?

An Emphasis on Rationality

Another major area of discussion has been the emphasis on rationality in transformative learning theory. This issue of rationality manifests itself in Mezirow’s overreliance on critical reflection as a means of effecting a perspective transformation. He (1990) states that “by far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical reflection—reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting” (p. 13). He identifies three forms of reflection in the transformation of meaning structures: content (reflecting on what we perceive, think, feel, and act), process (reflecting on how we perform the functions of perceiving), and premise (an awareness of why we perceive). Premise reflection, least common of the three and the basis for critical reflection, involves the examination of long-held presuppositions. According to Mezirow (1995) it is the emphasis on rationality, examining the very nature, consequence, and origin of our meaning perspectives, that can lead to a perspective transformation. Criticism arises much in part to his overly Western view of epistemology. “A number of writers have pointed out that rational thinking is a particularly Western concept, a product of the Enlightenment and Descartes’ mind/body split. Even in the Western rationality, and in particular its
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separation from experience, is also gender specific privileging men, the middle and upper class, and whites” (Merriam and Caffarella 1998). On the other hand, empirical research not only supports Mezirow’s assumption about rationality, but also identifies other factors such as the role of emotions, other ways of knowing, and unconscious learning, of equal importance in a perspective transformation.

Emotions and Critical Reflection

Most research that focused on reflection in relationship to transformative learning seems to do so at the level of critical reflection (premise reflection). Of those studies, most concur with Mezirow on one level: critical reflection is significant to transformative learning. For example, among the quantitative studies, Williams’ (1985) investigation of spouse abuse therapy found that men who demonstrated the greatest increase in the use of reasoning tactics (reflection) also had the greatest decrease in physically abusive behavior; and Van N ostrand (1992) found a significant correlation between the variables of critical analysis, life dissatisfaction, and social support. However, several studies concluded that critical reflection is granted too much importance in a perspective transformation, a process too rationally driven. Scott (1991a) concurs with Brooks (1989), who found in a study focusing on critical reflection and organizational change that “critically reflective learning processes consist of more than just the critical thought strategies generally thought to comprise them” (p. 175). In other words transformative learning is more than rationally based, but is reliant on the affective dimension of knowing. This dimension of knowing focuses on the role that emotions and feelings play in learning and making meaning. Morgan (1987), Coffman (1989), and Sveinungsgaard (1993) found that critical reflection can begin only once emotions have been validated and worked through. Gehrels (1984), in his study exploring how school principals made meaning from experience, found feelings to be the trigger for reflection. Neuman (1996) offers the most extensive study at present and one of the few carried out in an ongoing design (as opposed to a retrospective design), where he observed critical reflection developmentally and in its relationship to transformative learning among participants in the National Extension Leadership Development Program. Neuman found that transformative learning and critical reflection have an interactive and interdependent relationship. In more holistic critically reflective learning episodes, inclusive of affective and experiential elements, “participants developed significant capacity both to achieve a higher level of self-
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Rationality seems to be significant to transformative learning, though possibly not any more significant than the role of emotions and feelings. However, I tend to think that most educators focus on practices that facilitate rational thinking, such as critical reflection, and do not recognize its interdependent relationship with feelings. The discussion of feelings is something we often avoid in the classroom, arguing they are too subjective for formulating reasons and decisions. The irony is that just because we choose not to discuss them does not mean they don’t exist and exploiting them might actually help in the process of critical reflection. All of this makes me think about the role of education and emotional development. How do I feel about exploring the underlying emotions to thoughts discussed in the classroom? How do I as an adult educator get my students to reflect on and share their feelings in class in a safe and non-threatening manner? What risks are at stake when exploring feelings in the adult classroom?

This overreliance on rationality in transformative learning theory has also been explored from a physiological perspective (Taylor 1996; 1997b). There has been a notable increase of scientific studies published over the last decade in neurobiology—life sciences that involve the anatomy, physiology, and pathology of the nervous system (Caine and Caine 1994; Davidson and Cacioppo 1992) that provide a more in-depth understanding of human thinking and decision making. Contemporary research is revealing a more integrated relationship between the physiological process of cognition and emotion. LeDoux (1989) argues that cognition and emotion are mediated by separate and interacting systems of the brain. Parrott and Schulkin (1993) go even further, arguing that the continued separation of emotions from cognition perpetuates the belief that emotions are less complex and primitive. Instead, emotions should be recognized as inherently cognitive, because research shows that “emotions anticipate future needs, prepare for actions, and even prepare for thinking certain types of thoughts” (p. 56). The functions of emotions are seen more and more as filling the “gaps left by ‘pure reason’ in the determination of action and belief” (de Sousa 1991, p. 195).
Other Ways of Knowing

These forms of knowing refer to ways of knowing other than critical reflection that have shown to be significant in the process of a perspective transformation. Multiple studies refer to the importance of such ways as intuition (Bailey 1996; Brooks 1989), affective learning (Clark 1991; Scott 1991a; Sveinunsgaard 1993), extrarational knowing (Vogelsang 1993), and the guiding force of feelings (H unter 1980; Taylor 1994). The Group for Collaborative Inquiry (1994), in a recent study reconceptualizing the transformative learning process, identified the significance of whole person learning—“awareness and use of all the functions we have available for knowing, including our cognitive, affective, somatic, intuitive, and spiritual dimensions” (p. 171).

Included in other ways of knowing is connected knowing or learning through relationships. Relational knowing, the role of relationships in the learning process, has been given only minor attention by Mezirow in transformative learning theory. He has referred to the role of relationships only indirectly and generally in association with rational discourse and the final phases of a perspective with the intent of maximizing understanding between participants (Mezirow 1995). Also, he has tended to give less attention to the more subjective elements of relationships (trust, friendship, support) and their impact on transformative learning. Research has shown these latter elements of relationships to be the most common findings among all the studies reviewed (Taylor 1997a). Relationships, connected ways of knowing, were conceptualized in a variety of ways, such as modeling (Bailey 1996; Brooks 1989; Hunter 1980), interpersonal support (Morgan 1987), social support (Van Nostrand 1992), family connections (Pope 1996), networking (Elias 1993; Schlesinger 1983), learning-in-relationship (Group for Collaborative Inquiry 1994), friendships (First and Way 1995; Holt 1994; Taylor 1993, 1994) and developing trust (Gehrels 1984; Saavedra 1995; Shurina-Egan 1985). Cochrane (1981) found in a study about the meaning derived from personal withdrawal experiences that “it is in and through the disclosure of one’s self to another that meaning develops and is enhanced” (p. 114). It is important to note that connected knowing, often thought to be gender based, was also found to be significant among working class men returning to community college (W eisberger 1995).

These findings contradict the autonomous and formal nature of transformative learning as we presently understand it, and instead reveal a learning process that is much more dependent upon the
creation of support, trust, and friendship with others. Even though Mezirow sees discourse with others as significant to transformative learning, it is the lack of attention given to the role that relationships play in transformative learning that is so concerning. This omission is demonstrated most directly in his discussion of the ideal conditions for fostering transformative learning. It is through building trusting relationships that learners develop the necessary openness and confidence to deal with learning on an affective level, which is essential for managing the threatening and emotionally charged experience of transformation. Without the medium of relationships, critical reflection is impotent and hollow, lacking the genuine discourse necessary for thoughtful and in-depth reflection.

Despite all this research supporting the significance of relationships in transformative learning, “the field [adult education] neither adequately prepares nor supports adult educators to manage the dynamics of helping relationships or the dynamics of transformative learning within the context of those relationships” (Robertson 1996, pp. 43-44). Mezirow, along with others, offers little guidance in an area that is often fraught with professional challenges “such as transference, counter transference, confidentiality, sexual attraction, supervision, and burnout, each with attendant ethical, legal, and efficacy considerations” (p. 44). Robertson goes on to offer recommendations toward addressing this problem by (1) affirming adult education models that encourage helping relationships in transformative learning; (2) encouraging a teacher-learner centered theoretical focus; (3) promoting research on helping relationships; (4) revising preparatory curriculum for adult educators to address the dynamics of relationship building; (5) developing a code of ethics; and (6) providing confidential consultative support.

In addition to relationships, another “other way knowing” that provides insight into the nature of a perspective transformation is the unconscious development of thoughts and actions that occur without critical reflection, such that “meaning structures may become altered outside the participants focal awareness” (Taylor 1997b, p. 171). One explanation for the change in meaning perspectives among the participants, independent of reflection and conscious awareness, is understanding their implicit learning of new skills and habits. Skills and habits (procedural knowledge), such as driving a car or riding a bike, are often nonreflective actions that “take place outside focal awareness in what Polanyi (1967) refers to as tacit awareness” (Mezirow 1991, p. 106). They can be learned and improved upon outside one’s conscious awareness. This lack of critical reflection in relation to transformative
learning is further demonstrated by both Scott (1991a,b) and Elias (1993) who looked at individuals involved in social transformation. They found that transformative theory does not recognize the power of the unconscious. In Elias' study this meant discovering the irrational and developing life's direction through visions and dreams, whereas Scott identified the power of the collective unconscious as a stronger force than "rational assumptions or self-interest" (p. 240).

A final perspective on deemphasizing the cognitive process is offered by Edwards (1997) who conducted a collaborative inquiry into the lives of five women exploring their learning process of constructing and restructing their sexual identities in context to contemporary cultural codes. She found that these women relied on counter or alternative narratives in their transformative learning process, not rational discourse, when their life experiences exceeded the dominant cultural narratives on sexual identity. She contends that "transformational learning does not necessarily occur as the rational process Mezirow has presented. Rather our lives seem to be narratively organized and transformation occurs as a change in how we restory our lives in relation to a particular cultural narrative" (p. 184). Furthermore, this positioning of transformative learning narratively rather than cognitively allowed for a whole person approach to the learning process (Brooks and Edwards 1997; Edwards 1997).

These studies and others clearly show that transformative learning is not just rationally and consciously driven, but incorporates a variety of extrarational and unconscious modalities for revising meaning structures. They not only confirm the importance of rationality to transformative learning, but recognize as well other ways of knowing that are of equal importance to the learning process.
**Reflective Notes**

I believe practicing “other ways of knowing” and developing relationship pose the biggest challenge to adult educators in the practice of transformative learning. At the same time they offer insight into ways for significant learning to occur. However, if we as educators start to put an emphasis on these forms of learning are we properly trained for the related consequences? Furthermore, by emphasizing other ways of knowing in our practice are we beginning to cross the line between education and therapy? It also means asking: How does an emphasis on relationships and other ways of knowing change the role of adult educator? How do we best develop safe and responsible relationships in the classroom not only between the teacher and students, but among the students as well?

**Perspective Transformation: The Model**

This section of unresolved issues focuses on three particular aspects related to the steps/phases of the model of a perspective transformation. Specifically, the following are discussed: (1) the steps or phases of a perspective transformation; (2) the catalyst or trigger of a perspective transformation—a disorienting dilemma; and (3) the outcome—the definition of a perspective transformation. It is important to note that most critique in this area has been found predominantly among the empirical publications.

**The Steps or Phases**

Beginning with the model itself as defined by Mezirow (1978a, 1995), it outlines a process of a perspective transformation based on a study of women returning to school after a long hiatus. It is often illustrated as a linear, though not always step-wise process, beginning with a disorienting dilemma followed by a self-examination of feelings, critical reflection, exploration and planning of new roles, negotiating relationships, building confidence, and developing a more inclusive and discriminating perspective. His model of a perspective transformation has been confirmed in general by some studies (Dewane 1993; Hunter 1980; Lytle 1989; Morgan 1987; Shurina-Egan 1985; Williams 1985). However, few
of the studies provided actual data confirming each step. Of the studies that were supportive, Lytle's (1989) work on nurses returning to school for a bachelor of science in nursing degree was the most thorough in exploring the different steps to a perspective transformation, although she found only 30% (sample of 7) of the participants demonstrated all 10 steps. Later studies find the process of perspective transformation to be more recursive, evolving, and spiraling in nature (Coffman 1989, 1991; Elias 1993; Holt 1994; Laswell 1994; Neuman 1996; Saavedra 1995; Taylor 1994).

Mezirow (1995) concurs in his later publication that the process does not always follow the exact sequence of phases. More specifically, Coffman's (1989) study, an attempt to understand the patterns of acceptance and feelings of resentment among seminary students in response to an inclusive language mandate, determined a revision of three stages of perspective transformation. She was critical of stages 2, 3, and 4, arguing that not enough emphasis was put on the surprise, intensity, and processing of feelings. Coffman believed that without the expression and recognition of feelings participants will not engage their new reality, leave behind past resentment, and begin critical reflection. This seems to be consistent with other research on the relationship between critical reflection and feelings.

Pope (1996), who explored the impact of first generation higher education among ethnically diverse working class women, found the steps “do not adequately explain the long-term processes of transformation. . . . Over a period of time that spans 2 or 3 decades in the lives of these women, 'steps' lose relevance and are forgotten” (p. 176). Saavedra’s (1995) investigation of a teachers’ study group found transformative learning a process of consistent engagement in cycles of inquiry supported by 13 transformative conditions (e.g., self-assessment, ownership, mediational events, reflective practice, direct access to knowledge). Instead of using the 10 phases as a model for teacher transformation, she framed transformative learning within Mezirow’s four forms of learning, revealing a developmental process from learning within meaning schemes to the transformation of meaning perspectives.

In essence, it became quite clear as I reviewed these studies that Mezirow’s model was not inclusive of all the essential aspects inherent in the process of a perspective transformation. Even the studies (Hunter 1980; Morgan 1987; Williams 1985) that Mezirow (1991a) cites for empirical evidence in his book Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning reveal much more of the complexity of transformative learning than the 10-11 stage model depicts. For example, Morgan’s (1987) study on displaced homemakers is, in
several ways, not supportive of the 10 phases. She does not mention all the stages of the perspective transformation model, and she finds different stages much more fundamental to the transition process. Like Coffman’s (1989) “intense feelings,” the most universal and profound stage in Morgan’s research was “anger” and that this anger had to be resolved before the participant could move on in the transition process. Furthermore, all three of these studies gave little attention to critical reflection, a component considered most essential to perspective transformation. Hunter (1980), in a study of individuals who drastically altered their nutritional habits, seems to de-emphasize rationality as she found her participants “used some measure of blind faith in order to switch [nutritional habits]. . . . They temporarily suspended their critical faculties to make behavioral changes they did not fully understand” (p. 263, italics added).

Disorienting Dilemma

The catalyst and the first phase of Mezirow’s (1978a) perspective transformation is a disorienting dilemma—an acute internal/external personal crisis. Most of the studies that explored the complete process of a perspective transformation concur with this aspect of Mezirow’s model, although some studies broaden the definition of a disorienting dilemma. Clark (1991, 1993), who explored the impact of context on the process of perspective transformation, found that not only is a disorienting dilemma a trigger to transformative learning, but so are “integrating circumstances.” Integrating circumstances are “indefinite periods in which the persons [sic] consciously or unconsciously searches for something which is missing in their life; when they find this missing piece, the transformation process is catalyzed” (pp. 117-118). Scott (1991a), in her study on the nature of transformation that results from a leader’s participation in a community organization, identified two types of disequilibrium that were necessary for initiating change in beliefs: (1) an external event that provokes an internal dilemma and (2) an internal disillusionment whereby the participants recognize that previous approaches and solutions are no longer adequate. In contrast to the others, Pope (1996), whose study focused predominantly on women of color, found the trigger event “more like an unfolding evolution rather than a response to a crisis” (p. 176). This finding seems to fit with Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves’ (1996, 1998) study of the meaning-making process among those diagnosed as HIV positive. They found an “initial reaction” at diagnosis that lasted 6 months to 5 years. This reaction
was followed by a “catalytic experience” that helped HIV patients view their diagnosis in a new and more productive way.

Despite this more in-depth research into the catalyst of transformative learning, there is little understanding of why some disorienting dilemmas lead to a perspective transformation and others do not. What factors contribute and/or inhibit this triggering process? Why do some significant events, such as death of a loved one or personal injury, not always lead to a perspective transformation, whereas seemingly minor events, such as a brief encounter or a lecture, sometimes stimulate transformative learning? Two studies provide some insight into these questions. Elias (1993), in a study about the development of socially transformative leaders, identified eight categories of common learning experiences that led to a new perspective. These supported the values and capacities of leaders for social transformation, such as developing multiple intelligences, cultivating critical thinking, expressing one's voice, and successfully confronting authority. The baseline experience in his study for women was confronting authority, whereas for men it was developing a greater awareness of one's feelings. Clevinger (1993), in a study of the transformative experience of kidney transplant patients, found sociocultural distortions a precursor of transformative learning and “if identified before-the-fact, perhaps they could qualify as predictors of transformative learning” (p. 99).

Defining a Perspective Transformation

One of the most elusive concepts of transformative learning is the definitional outcome of a perspective transformation. What is the consequence of changing your world view? What are related outcomes of revising meaning perspectives? Mezirow (1991a) defines a perspective transformation as—

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally making choices or otherwise acting on these new understandings. (p. 167)

Accompanying this change in meaning perspective is an increase in self-confidence in new roles and relationships. Most studies concur with Mezirow’s definition of a perspective transformation; however, many studies also found this definition too narrow and rationally
based. The present definition connotes that as a result of a perspective transformation an individual becomes more in touch with his or her logical-rational side, again discounting other ways of knowing. Clark (1991), on the other hand, identified three dimensions to a perspective transformation: psychological (changes in understanding of the self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioral (changes in lifestyle). In Van Nostrand’s (1992) synthesized model of lifestyle changes of female ex-smokers, she operationalized a perspective transformation as a revelation that included new concepts of knowledge, mystical experience, personal power, and a redefined perspective followed by a sustained change over time. Additional characteristics of a transformation emerge from other studies as well, such as an increase in personal power (Hunter 1980; Pierce 1986; Pope 1996; Schlesinger 1983; Scott 1991a; Sveinunggaard 1993; Turner 1986; Van Nostrand 1992), spirituality, a transpersonal realm of development (Cochrane 1981; Hunter 1980; Lucas 1994; Scott 1991a; Sveinunggaard 1993; Van Nostrand 1992), compassion for others (Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves 1996, 1998; First and Way 1995; Gehrels 1984), creativity (Scott 1991a), a shift in discourse (Saavedra 1995), courage (Lucas 1994; Neuman 1996), a sense of liberation (Bailey 1996), and a new connectedness with others (Gehrels 1984; Laswell 1994; Weisberger 1996). Two studies, interestingly, identified the occurrence of regression (Williams 1985) and flashbacks (Laswell 1994) among participants after a period of time following a perspective transformation. Most studies were carried out in retrospect and do not clearly know the participants’ original perspective prior to a transformative learning experience. Also, several studies that reported a perspective transformation among participants offered little or no data for support or clarification.
Review of Literature

Reflective Notes

I find that the three areas just discussed provoke some of the greatest interest among students exploring transformative learning theory. They are intrigued by questions most basic to understanding a perspective transformation, such as: What triggers a change in meaning perspectives? Is the change purely an individual psychological phenomenon or is there a social dimension to change? Why do certain triggers in our lives result in a perspective transformation and others not? What needs to take place (e.g., steps, phases, action, conditions) for the trigger to evolve into a transformation? Does one's perspective continue to change, regress, or remain static? What are the inherent characteristics of a perspective transformation? What amount of change constitutes a perspective transformation? What defines a perspective transformation? How often could a perspective transformation occur in a person’s lifetime?

Conclusion

The intent of the second section of this monograph was to synthesize all the major critiques and empirical studies of transformative learning theory over the last 20 years. From this synthesis the purpose was to identify the unresolved issues about the basic premises of transformative learning theory and the varying nature of a perspective transformation. Focusing specifically on the basic premises, seven significant issues were identified:

1. Individual vs. social change
2. A decontextualized view of learning
3. A universal view of adult learning
4. Transformative learning as adult development
5. An emphasis on rationality
6. A need for other ways of knowing
7. The model of a perspective transformation

Much of the criticism with transformative learning theory rests on Mezirow’s appropriation and integration of Habermas’ communicative theory of learning with the epistemology of transformative learning. I would concur, but also add that the difference between the critiques and Mezirow’s interpretation of transformative
learning theory is due in large part to the various authors' differing views of self and its locus of control in the universe. For example, Mezirow is described as viewing the individual as having a choice and control over his or her environment and comes by his or her own ends as a result of individual actions and desires. He sees reality as perceived and understood from the frame of reference of the individual instead of superimposed by society. On the opposite end of the continuum, for example, fall Collard and Law (1989) who see individuals as pawns within sociocultural and historical events. They do not see the individual separate from society; instead, they are one and the same. In the middle seem to fall Clark and Wilson (1991) whereby they recognize not only the free will of the individual but as well the formative impact the sociocultural context has on the self. In essence, it is these researchers' own frame of reference in regard to the structuring of the “self” that prevents them from arriving at a congruent understanding of transformative learning theory.

Ironically, it is this emphasis on the individual, the self, that has dominated research concerning the nature of a perspective transformation. As the review shows, most of the studies have focused on the individual transformative experience in a variety of different settings. From these studies emerged a number of concerns about the process of a perspective transformation. Specifically, there seems to be a lack of recognition of the role of emotions and relational knowing and an overemphasis on essentiality of critical reflection. Furthermore, the various components and phases of the model itself have been called into question, such that the process revealed is much more complex than initially thought. For example, transformative learning cannot account for why all disorienting dilemmas do not lead to a transformation. Furthermore, the definition of a perspective transformation seems to stop short at recognizing a higher level of conscious, the collective unconscious, beyond its autonomous and self-serving outcome.
Review of Literature