

Environment, Politics and Development Working Paper Series

***Department of Geography,
King's College London***

Year 2015

Paper # 70

Development Transformative Learning (TL) Process Model

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Geography at:*
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Introduction.

Transformative learning theory has taken on many influences during its development over the last 40 years and includes the work of Kuhn's (1962) on paradigms, Freire's (1970) conscientization and Habermas's (1971, 1984) domains of learning (Kitchenham, 2008). But critically for a theory of learning that seeks to engage learners in new paradigms a visual representation of the theory as a process is not readily available or over-simplifies the process so that important nuances of learning are overlooked (Nerstrom, 2013).

Such visualisations may be important to learners and to those wishing to facilitate it because the learning effectiveness of an individual may be impacted differently depending upon the media and medium used for delivery. This goes beyond catering to learning styles towards having an awareness of meta-cognition that allows for self reflection, evaluation and correction before epistemic learning practices, such as transformative learning allow the learner to think about their own, "frameworks, or worldviews which provide the context or perspective through which we are learning about learning and learning about the matter at hand" (Bawden, 1997a, p. 27). Moreover, Bawden (1997b) alludes to epistemic learning as that which allows the learner to learn how to challenge and change worldviews and paradigms, including dominant ones of "reductionism, determinism, autonomous individualism and materialism" (after Vitz, 1996). If dominant views described by Vitz (1996) are to be challenged by new learning or consciousness, then transformative learning might be key to unlocking the process.

Consequently the visualisation model offered here (figure one, page three) was developed with the intention of correcting this oversight while also providing a starting point for engaging with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) who were struggling with organizational learning and with whom I would be engaging with in research interviews as part of the third strand of my PhD research on Transformational Learning in disaster adaptation and resilience contexts.

By allowing *prospective* learners (including those I wish to carry out research with from NGO's) to view the visualisation model of the Transformational Learning process it may:

- Appear less overwhelming or intimidating as each phase is clearly described.
- Allow for a feeling of solidarity and understanding for the feelings and views of others who are going through now, or may go through in future, the same phases and challenges as part of transformational learning.

A further reason for developing the model and sharing with individuals charged with learning within their organisations is to address some of the criticisms (e.g. Taylor and Cranton, 2013) about Transformative Learning (TL) research being primarily retrospective and focusing on interviews with individuals who have already gone through the process of TL.

A Visual Model: what it means for understanding transformative learning.

In my visualisation of the TL process (figure one, on page three) there are several phases shown that are said to be required in order for existing frames of references to

be challenged and accommodated in a new schema of understanding that brings about change in intention, behaviour or action (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996; Cranton, 1994, 1996).

The visualisation draws heavily on the phases of TL described by Mezirow (2000) alongside the processes and outcomes described by Taylor (2013), Cranton (1994, 1996) and others. This particular representation also recognises that unconscious thought and cognitive processing are as important as critical reflective processes required for true transformation of thoughts, beliefs and intentions revealed in current or future practice or actions. These are represented in figure one by thought bubbles in which unconscious thoughts allow processing and reflection both when directly engaged in learning but also in quieter moments away from the stimulus, experience or activity. These moments and periods of unconscious thoughts provide buffers and connections to the more recognised and formal phases of transformative learning and occur throughout the process. By allowing learners to acknowledge the impact of unconscious thought in blocking learning pathways (Cranton, 2006) it paves the way for the transformational learning journey to commence. By having a visualisation of the unconscious in figure one makes this idea less abstract and more concrete – it is there on the page to be viewed, thought about and assimilated!

In figure one, *generalisation of past experiences* is substituted for ‘frames of reference’ in order to simplify the model/process for learners, although the meaning is intended to be the same. These generalisations of past experience purposely indicate minimal reflection but also recognise that they exist as memories borne from that experience. These memories may have become embedded via repetition of a task or way of doing something so that it becomes reflexive rather than reflective. If there is little reason (in the mind of the individual) to change practice because they have not been challenged by newer experiences then it is unlikely to change. Consequently the unconscious mind provides a stream of ‘automatic thoughts’ which when linked to memory and past practice forms a strong connection to belief in ones intentions, behaviours and actions.

This presents a particular challenge to those seeking to engage individuals in thinking about potential consequences of disasters (including climate change) because individuals may field a number of automatic thoughts in order to deflect examination of their patterns of consumption, transport and energy use or disaster preparedness, for example. Furthermore cultural lenses including religious background and beliefs, influences from friends and family and political affiliations may inhibit their self-efficacy in bringing about change. These are all encompassed in the original models of transformative learning as individual *frames of reference* (here represented by generalisation of past experiences) which when altered is said to lead to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996; Cranton, 1994, 1996). In particular, frames of reference can be identified as the ‘associations, concepts, values, feelings and conditioned responses that are the result of experiences that define an individual’s life world’ (Mezirow, 1997 p. 5). Furthermore such frames of reference can result in a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit an individual’s preconceptions, leading them to be dismissed as irrelevant or wrong. This may go some way to explaining why some choose not to address threats posed by disasters as doing so may lead to discomfort.

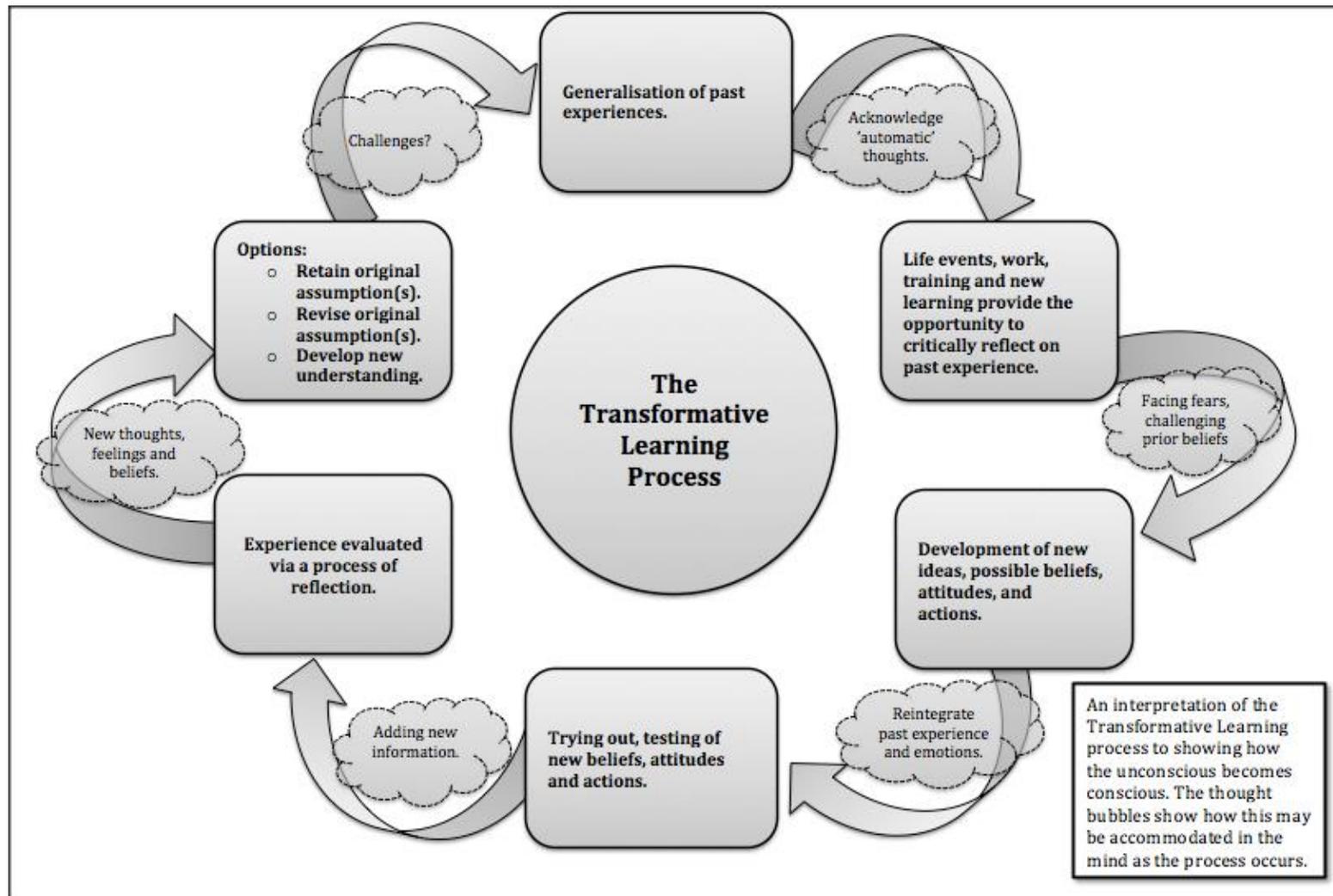


Figure One: The Transformational Learning Process (Sharpe, 2015a,b)

However TL has the potential to *challenge previously held beliefs via life events, work-based training or independent learning*. Certain life events may well come as a shock or series of shocks that remove the individual from his/her comfort zone and cause them to question previously held beliefs, ways of doing something or actions. This change in awareness or awakening is central to what Homer-Dixon advocates as the adoption of the prospective mind that is, 'grounded in the knowledge that constant surprise and change are now inevitable' (Homer-Dixon, 2006 p.29)

Critical reflection is significant to the examination of fears, challenges and prior beliefs that previously were initiated as *unconscious responses* to perceived threats to modes of living, working etc. Confronting these problems through new learning experiences may be easier to cope with if experiences are shared with others undergoing similar transitions. Therefore TL is also a *socially constructed* experience and one in which sharing in the recognition and negotiation of emotional responses may allow for new learning and change to *feel* less intimidating. By encouraging learners to share their fears, concerns or perceived barriers they will start to consciously process these and be able to start to formulate new ideas, beliefs, attitudes, intentions and actions to respond to the problem facing them. This is important for developing what Bandura referred to as 'requisite competencies' (Bandura, 2000 p.75) or ways of doing things that are only negotiated when faced with barriers that force the development of new ways of thinking or skillsets that would not be developed by non-engagement with a problem.

This also helps to develop efficacy at the personal level. This is known as self-efficacy (belief in ones ability to do something) and if shared and experienced by a wider group this may also lead to group efficacy. The development of group-efficacy is also supported in a resilience context by Homer-Dixon (2006) who suggests that a collective mind would help make our societies – and each other - more resilient to external shock and more supple in response to rapid change (Homer-Dixon 2006, p30). Moreover when collective learning is socially constructed and shared within safe confines of a group it conceivably makes it easier to *try out, test and formulate new ideas and beliefs*, especially if learners trust each other (e.g. Brown and Posner, 2001).

New information and experiences from others may also allow novel perspectives to be communicated and shared for consideration. This does not mean that this knowledge or experience is automatically accepted by all of the learners; but it is more likely to be accepted if this new knowledge comes from a trusted source. This all adds into the processing of new information, which may occur in moments of critical reflection where experiences (including vicarious ones told and shared by others) are evaluated.

However this is a complex process that may occur quicker for some than others, not least because of the strength of original frames of reference or generalisations of past experiences which are coloured to a lesser or greater degree by a wide range of cultural lenses and ethical considerations. Nevertheless if these thoughts and experiences are given context and deeper consideration it is possible for them to be included in the formation of *new thoughts, feelings, beliefs, intention and actions* that may lead to the following learning scenarios:

- A. Retention of the original assumptions.
- B. A revision of the original assumption.
- C. A development of new understanding.

In terms of transformational learning, a reverse order of the list above would be most desirable in terms of evolving learning that has come from new information, experiences or ways of doing things as the learner adapts their modes of thinking (both conscious and unconscious) to be reflective rather than reflexive leading to a *new understanding of the problem* (C, in the list above). This is the most radical form of learning, which may result in what Friere (1970) termed conscientization. However revising original assumptions about a problem and written about in more detail below is a key underpinning of the cognition process required to unlock this new understanding.

Consequently, if the learner *revises his/her original assumption* regarding a problem (B, in the list above) this is likely to lead to strong feelings of belief in the validity of their newly learned, tested and reflected upon argument, position or way of doing something. This is extremely important in the development of self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986). It is believed that that this construct influences the accomplishments and choices that individuals make in deciding what can and cannot be achieved. This is significant in disaster resilience contexts when the problems may appear overwhelming. Hence if transformational learning processes can help nurture the development of self-efficacy beliefs, individuals and groups may learn to overcome obstacles and demonstrate resilience to unexpected events. In other words their ability to cope with uncertainty, shocks and change is increased when their self-efficacy beliefs are well developed.

Conversely a lack of self-efficacy belief lowers confidence in an individual's ability to achieve and the perception is that tasks are more difficult. Pajaries (2002) argued that this creates stress and narrow vision of how to best solve the problem. The role that transformational learning plays here is by encouraging learners to recognise that such thoughts are automatic responses rather than considered ones (see figure one). This requires the development of or critical thinking and reflection in order for self-efficacy to develop via testing and trying out new ways of thinking about a problem. Bandura (1986), suggests that, "persons with a strong sense of efficacy deploy their attention and effort to the demands of the situation and are spurred by obstacles to greater effort" (Bandura, 1986, p. 394). Therefore when *revision of original assumptions* occur, they bring with it a deep level of accomplishment learned via the development of requisite competencies which are ways of tackling obstacles or problems inherent in developing self-efficacy beliefs as a key underpinning to transformational learning.

Finally, the least desirable outcome of transformational learning would be the *retention of original assumptions* (A, in the list above). If original assumptions are retained, this suggests resistance to the problem that was not overcome through the transformational learning process. This is a possible scenario if a learner decides to take a dogmatic position and only relates from their own world-view, dismissing other experiences or emotions as invalid. It also unlikely that such an individual would be seeking out new information, ways of doing something or learning if such beliefs or

world-views are held. However, by dint of an individual learning alongside others, having their worldview challenged and other perspectives offered might result in their original assumptions changing over time and indeed long after the learning has taken place as new experiences, challenges and time causes deeper reflection to occur. Therefore *critical reflection* is highlighted as the most important part of the process of transformational learning and understanding how to initiate it may be key to unlocking all of the phases described as part of the original model as well as the visualisation offered here.

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