

Transformative Learning

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The leading proponent of transformative learning is Jack Mezirow who believes "The ideal conditions for free, full participation in reflective discourse, as defined by Jurgen Habermas, are also the ideal conditions for adult learning. They imply a set of social and political goals grounded in the nature of human communication. Habermas's theory of communicative action(1) provides the social theoretical context for the transformation theory of learning, and his writings are very helpful in understanding transformation theory."

This theory states that there are three basic kinds of learning:

- **instrumental learning** - task oriented problem solving
- **communicative learning** - understanding the meaning of what others communicate
- **emancipatory or reflective learning** - uncovering and reflecting on one's own assumptions

Transformative learning involves uncovering our habitual meaning schemes (specific attitudes and beliefs) and meaning perspectives (sets of meaning schemes) and the assumptions which underlie them and then questioning the validity of those assumptions.

The basic propositions of transformative learning are:

Proposition	Translation
"Learning is using a meaning that we have already made to guide the way we think, act, or feel about what we are currently experiencing."	Learning is making sense of or giving coherence to our experiences by interpreting them through previously meaningful experiences.

Proposition	Translation
"Learning is an extension of our ability to make explicit, schematize, appropriate, remember, validate, and act upon."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● make explicit = uncover and label or communicate. ● schematize = make an association within a frame of reference. ● appropriate = accept an interpretation as our own. ● remember = call upon an earlier interpretation. ● validate = establish the truth, justification, appropriateness, or authenticity of what is asserted. ● act upon = make a decision, change an attitude toward, modify a perspective on, or perform.

Proposition	Translation
“Learning is a dialectical process of interpretation in which we interact with objects and events, guided by an old set of expectations.”	Normally, when we learn something, we attribute an old meaning to a new experience, often glossing over the difference between the new and old in order to make it fit our expectations, assumptions, or mental models.

Proposition	Translation
“Learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions or premises are reflected upon and found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid.”	<p>When we have no choice but to recognize a situation in which reality differs from our expectations, this can trigger a change in the way we see the world.</p> <p>When we uncover our basic assumptions and find them wanting or untrue it can trigger a transformative process in us.</p>

To learn more about transformative learning see Mezirow, Jack and Associates. *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990; and Mezirow, Jack. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.

(1) Habermas, J. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society. Vol 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason. (Trans. Thomas McCarthy.) Boston: Beacon Press, 1984, 1987.

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