

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

### *What is Transformative Learning? (Pt. 1)*

There's a history with the term, "transformative learning," which goes back several decades. UCO's use of the term encompasses that meaning as well as operationalizing it as spelled out within the Central Six tenets of a transformative student experience.

Jack Mezirow, a leading thinker in adult education, developed his characterization of transformative learning (TL) in the late 70s and early 80s. Dr. Patricia Cranton of Penn State, another leading writer on transformative learning, says that the "elegantly simple" definition of TL includes the idea of people changing the way they interpret their experiences and their interactions with the world:

. . . an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world. (Cranton, n.d., available [here](#))

This idea of a fundamental change in perspective or frame of reference (King, 2002) is at the heart of transformative learning. When someone undergoes such a change, he has, in essence, "transformed" his view of himself or of the world or of how he interacts with others and his environment.

At UCO, this is exactly what we aspire to accomplish in students' lives and in their learning. Through exposure to the Central Six tenets, we work to provide the learning environment that makes it more likely students will experience transformations in their thinking than if they went to college at a place which did not---at least consciously and explicitly---attempt to create such opportunities.

Before looking at the nexus between transformative learning theory and UCO's distinct version of the process, a bit more discussion of TL in its historical meaning and context is warranted. Not all faculty have backgrounds in adult education theory and practice, and given TL's historical roots within that discipline, a quick primer may be in order.

Jack Mezirow published research concerning the processes and changes that 83 adult women went through when they returned to college (1975). This research led him to conclude that these women had undergone a change in perspective as a result of their experiences. Mezirow described this transformation of perspective as going through ten ordered phases:

- Experiencing a disorienting dilemma
- Undergoing self-examination
- Conducting a critical assessment of internalized assumptions and feeling a sense of alienation from traditional social expectations

- Relating discontent to the similar experiences of others---recognizing that the problem is shared
  - Exploring options for new ways of acting
  - Building competence and self-confidence in new roles
  - Planning a course of action
  - Acquiring the knowledge and skills for implementing a new course of action
  - Trying out new roles and assessing them
  - Reintegrating into society with the other perspective
- (as listed by Cranton, P. [2006], p. 20)

Mezirow continued to refine his thinking and his model of perspective transformation, which he came to characterize as “a structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 100). The idea, then, that some kind of cognitive dissonance, some kind of realization that what one believes isn't necessarily making sense anymore, is at the heart of a transformative learning experience.

And this is exactly what we love to see happening in our students: they come to understand that they've held a limiting view of the world or of how things work, and they adjust their thinking to accommodate a more accurate or expansive understanding. Whether this is a part of disciplinary realizations (curvature of spherical gravitational field, for instance, in celestial mechanics) or a part of self-understanding in relation to the world (my use of bottled water in plastic containers for convenience's sake is a profligate waste of energy and resources compared to carrying my own container), the student has transformed a perspective of her personal view of reality.

If such transformations in thinking and perspective sound a lot like what a liberal arts education attempts to achieve in college, there are many ways in which these two mindsets overlap, something we'll examine in a future article.

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