

## Transformative Learning: evolutions of the adult learning theory

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**Keywords :** *Transformative Learning, Adult Education Theory; Transformation, Mezirow*

**Abstract :** *This paper investigates how Transformative Learning has developed as the dominant theory in adult learning and education. The goals are to analyze the progressive self-sufficiency of the Theory from its discoverer and to examine its expansion as a mainstream in the field. The hypothesis is that the massive spread of the theory of Transformative Learning is due to its appeal as a master key to transformation. This has allowed the 'autonomous' development from Mezirow itself and the vast diffusion to the great detriment of conceptual coherence. The research questions are: How did Transformative Learning establish itself as a theory of adult education? What characteristics are at the base of this good fortune? How did Mezirow explore and then define the theory of Transformative Learning? Is the Mezirow's reference theory another name for the Transformative Learning Theory? The article starts with the birth of Transformative Learning and then focuses on the consolidation of some core-concepts of the theory. The diffusion of different approaches will be discussed. Finally, the international affirmation of Transformative Learning is presented with references to the European network.*

### **Titre: Apprentissage Transformateur : les évolutions de la théorie de l'apprentissage des adultes**

**Mots-clés :** *Apprentissage Transformateur; Théorie de l'éducation des adultes; Transformation; Mezirow*

**Résumé :** *Cet article propose d'étudier l'apprentissage transformateur en tant que théorie dominante dans le champ de l'éducation des adultes. Il vise à étudier, d'une façon critique, cette théorie, devenue de plus en plus indépendante de son auteur. Le but de l'article est d'examiner les évolutions de ce construit et son expansion dans le champ de la formation des adultes. L'hypothèse est que la diffusion massive du construit d'apprentissage transformateur est due à la possibilité de le convoquer dans différents contextes et situations. Les questions de recherche traitées dans cet article sont les suivantes : Comment l'apprentissage transformateur s'est-il développé en tant que théorie de l'éducation des adultes? Quelles sont ses caractéristiques? Comment Mezirow a-t-il exploré puis défini la théorie de l'apprentissage transformateur? Quelle est la théorie de référence de Mezirow? L'article se structure en traitant de la naissance de la théorie et se focalise ensuite sur la consolidation de ses concepts de base. L'évolution des différentes approches sera discutée. Enfin, l'affirmation internationale de l'apprentissage transformateur est présentée notamment dans ses liens avec le réseau européen.*

## Introduction

The Transformative theory developed in North America by Jack Mezirow in the late 1970's has gained widespread acclaim and resulted in a flowering of diverse achievements. Forty years later, it has become the dominant theory in the field of adult education at an international level. Growing interest in Transformative Learning goes hand in hand with its dissemination through international conferences and the progressive construction of a dedicated research community. The development of the theoretical model took place recursively and accumulatively. Mezirow identified some basic concepts which he then corrected or modified. The linguistic formulation took place along a dilated temporal period between the end of the 1970's and the early 1990's. Rather than being constructed in a deductive way both the starting hypothesis of the theory of Transformative Learning and the experimental verification of results imposed themselves inductively. This bottom-up methodological approach appears to have birthed many of the developments of the 1970s theoretical models as: Grounded Theory; Information Theory; Neo-Empirism; Andragogy and Transformative Learning Theory itself. 'Classical' deductive theories start from a priori hypotheses; the Transformative Theory emerged from a posteriori premises, in a centrifugal way. Initially, from the results of a study on the learning of a group of adult women and from observations on the practice of educators, Mezirow derived some key concepts, around which collected further elaborations. Successively, Transformative Theory consolidated through new thematic approaches or various application research.

Between the basic theoretical structure and the different interpretative approaches, a real gap occurred. If on the one hand the Theory is born around some common and shared Mezirow's ideas, on the other it has multiplied its declinations by the works of many authors. Thus, a kind of fragmentation and disaggregation occurred from the original model, with conceptualizations only partially related to the original core of Mezirow's thought. This paper will investigate how Transformative Learning has developed the dominant theory of adult learning. But the Theory is getting weaker with increasing semantic and linguistic revisions of its key concepts, while progressive proliferation of versions spins things further from the firm center. The goals are to analyze the progressive self-sufficiency of the Theory from its discoverer and to examine its expansion as a mainstream in the field.

Many scholars with methodological and epistemological approaches contiguous to Mezirow's thought, claim their concepts to be the same as the Transformative Learning. In most cases, the theoretical reference is neither spot-on nor faithful to what Mezirow actually writes. Often an author appears to link their work to Transformative Learning in their specific field of interest because they know the name and desire a learning that transforms. The hypothesis is that the massive spread of the theory of Transformative Learning is due to its appeal as a master key to transformation. That it seems easily applied and vastly adaptable has surely helped. This has allowed the 'autonomous' development of the Transformative Theory from Mezirow itself.

The result has been the vast diffusion to the detriment of conceptual coherence. However, Mezirow himself fed the expansions and welcomed original contributions. He did not claim direct 'control' of a unified theory but entrusted it to workers and researchers in the field.

This analysis aims to illustrate the definition and consolidation of the theory in relation to its author, its cultural context of reference or the research field of adult education. The approach is qualitative and critical; the analysis is performed from documental data in order to answer to research questions. According to a chronological perspective, it examines Transformative theory development in its stepping stones. The study will answer the following questions: How did Transformative Learning establish itself as a theory of adult education? What characteristics are at the base of this good fortune? How did Mezirow explore and then define the theory of Transformative Learning? Is the Mezirow's reference theory another name for the Transformative Learning Theory?

The article starts with the birth of Transformative Learning and then focuses on the consolidation of some core-concepts of the theory. The diffusion of different approaches will be discussed. Finally, the international affirmation of Transformative Learning is presented with references to the European network that celebrate its current cultural and scientific centrality.

## Theory Rises

Mezirow's first research interest was the Dynamics of Community Development, a topic often encountered in daily work as a Director of an Executive for Programs for International Cooperation. His works during the Sixties and the Seventies deal with issues of basic adult education (Mezirow, 1963). In the early 1960's Mezirow begins writing about Adult Education. As late as 1975 he is still examining basic issues of education viewed thru the broad context of adult education and literacy programs (Mezirow, 1975; Mezirow et. al. 1975).

Mezirow's theory begins to emerge during his impact assessment of a nation-wide US study on community colleges. Of particular interest were re-entry programs encouraging women who had previously abandoned or interrupted their studies. The first sketch of Mezirow's critical theory emerges in his attempt to connect the idea of perspective transformation with Habermas' concept of emancipatory action learning. This study of 12 U.S. programs was designed and conducted by Mezirow using grounded theory inductive methodology. Twenty-four additional US programs were later added along with more than 800 respondents and 50 in-depth interviews. The goal was to build a "normative description that derived inductively" (Mezirow, 1978, p.56) for modal patterns of innovation in administrative and organizational programs involving middle and working-class students specifically. Almost amazed by the serendipity, Mezirow recognizes his study has uncovered how perspectives of meaning transform.

Mezirow noticed that transformation began occurring as the women in the study became aware of the cultural and social constraints to their progress and helped to see the in-built psychological barriers in their lives and in views of their own identity. The national report highlights perhaps even discovers and defines the importance of the transformation of the meaning perspective, which is (and forever will be) the fundamental foundation of all Transformative Learning. The report is focused on this 'discover' rather than on the outcomes and the data of the study itself.

Mezirow sees the important implications of his study. He glimpses a theory of adult development which no longer lives in the old boxes of just acquiring knowledge and modifying behavior. Mezirow turns his focus from adult education to adult learning. Conceptualization arises from research data not from hypothetical-deduction from any axiomatic structure. The theoretical model emerges from observation and interpretation of qualitative data. This abductive research approach characterizes and gives popularity to the newly forming theory of Transformative Learning.

By the early 1980's, Mezirow shifts his interest, definitely, to what he calls "the beginnings of a critical theory of adult learning and education" (Mezirow, 1981, p.3). To support and corroborate his research hypotheses he employs Habermas' epistemology (Mezirow, 1981, p.16). Using Habermas' Knowledge and Human Interest and both volumes of Theory of Communicative Action, Mezirow argues that the three 'constituent' areas of knowledge link to three cognitive interests - instrumental, communicative, emancipatory - to produce three aspects: Work, including instrumental control of one's environment; Communicative Interaction, including intersubjectivity; Power, including self-knowledge and self-reflection. He emphasizes each field has different research objects, methods, interpretative categories, reference concepts, and philosophies on adult learning. This last area interests him particularly for its implications in the social sciences and in education. Mezirow finds a substantial convergence on the concepts (of and needs for) of critical reflection: Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist criticism of ideology, Freire's social pedagogy. Then, his focus shifts to the social changes and political power and progress available through emancipatory education aimed at individuals. Mezirow maintains that the domination of ideologies, the psychological constraints affecting people's lives, and oppressive education all slow down social and personal transformation.

He posits that political, social, and individual change, can only occur through "emancipatory action as synonymous with perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981, p.6). Continuing critical analysis is required to recognize and demystify the implicit ideologies and to avoid the reification of the hidden mechanisms of domination that prevent transformative learning from taking place. Such analysis must always include a critical review of the taken-for-granted (and so unconscious) meaning perspectives affecting adult learners in their personalities, their relationships, and their working lives. Transformative Learning requires that the learner glimpse how combine with unresolved-and-internalized childhood problems, to affect their adult agency, their identity, socialization, and future. Mezirow's theory is the crossroad of the political and psychoanalytic. Transformative Learning is where Marxist ideological-social discourse meets Freud and Gould's dismantling of childhood's 'illusions of safety'.

Mezirow isn't a theoretical thinker concerned with "the philosophical question of whether Habermas has succeeded in establishing the epistemological status of the primary knowledge-constitutive interests with categorically distinct object domains, types of experience and corresponding forms of inquiry" (Mezirow, 1981, p.17). Initially far from wanting to establish a new theory, Mezirow sought to identify the system and methods by whom learning transformed an adult learner. All the

while Mezirow researched, Behaviorism controlled the field of adult education as a 'strongly institutionalized ideology'. The behaviorist model defines behavioral goals, and trains skills with particular measurable outcomes already determined. This approach has been left behind by Mezirow because it cannot see a learner-centered perspective typical of the andragogy.

In 1981, Mezirow calls adult education "any organized and sustained effort to facilitate learning" [and, he believes] a set of standards derived from the generic characteristics of adult development has emerged from research and professional practice" (Mezirow, 1981, p.21). Self-directedness is his touchstone. He incorporates this principle of the method and practice of teaching adult learners in a document named Charter for Andragogy he addresses educators from an applied professional perspective. Mezirow desires to 'adjust' andragogy to a more critical version; he aims to formulate an alternative vision of Knowles's model, to enhance of the function of perspective transformation through the critical reflection on adults' assumptions or ideologies and to emphasize the awareness of their influence in adults' lives (Mezirow, 1981, pp.21-22). Charter for Andragogy develops through 12 principles, a few of which directly refer to Mezirow's ideas: helping learners to become aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that influence their perceptions; helping them enhance their levels of understanding; encouraging self-reflection, and critical judgements. The other principles derive from the andragogic orientation: helping learners to define their needs; increasing their responsibility for learning objectives; fostering problem posing; problem solving and decision-making; reinforcing self-concept as a learner. The Charter also details specific actions for practitioners: to decrease progressively the learner's dependency on the educator; to emphasize participatory learning, experimental methods and learning contracts; to introduce ethical issues when encouraging a learner's responsibility in making choices.

The Charter was never intended to be the founding document of a movement, nor a book of rules to a new theory. Using these practical guidelines can allow an educator to help a "learner become aware of alternative meaning perspectives relevant to his situation, to become acquainted with them, to become open to them and to make use of them to more clearly understand does not prescribe the correct action to be taken" (Mezirow, 1981, p.20). The Charter purpose is not strictly connected to a new theoretical foundation; Mezirow's aim is committed to lead professionals to expand their educational activities against the domination of the ideologies, a segregated society, the social marginality. This aim seems to be strictly tied to his first job as an educator and as a coordinator of international cooperation programs.

## A new comprehensive-reconstructive theory

Ten years after his research on women, Mezirow realizes results from his earlier studies might offer, compared to Andragogy, a wholly different way to conceptualize how the methods and practices of teaching adult learners really come together. His new theory emerges from practice, just like in the early 1970's, Andragogy had formed itself as a theory. Indeed, Malcolm Knowles transformed twenty years of experience as an educator and manager of YMCA training programs into a theory, inductively built (Knowles, 1973). Knowles created a model of adult learning and teaching around six principles that emerged from his professional knowledge of informal adult learning (Knowles, 1950) and underpinned by studies on teaching and learning theories. Mezirow's theory on adult emancipatory learning develops in a similar way in 1990's North America where modernization is causing a questioning of all forms of rationality and tradition. Modernization's central focus was change, and its socio-economic and socio-political implications affected disciplinary fields and a great deal of research.

While Mezirow acknowledged that his conceptualization presented a challenge to the dominant theories of adult learning, he seems also to understand how different his theorization is compared to Behaviorism and Andragogy: "Understandably, one may find transformative learning threatening, exhilarating, and empowering" (Mezirow, 1990a, p.XIII). As Andragogy - the method and practice of teaching adult learners - Transformative Learning emerges from the practice - as the theory to help adults the transform their perspectives of meaning or habits of mind.

Although the ideas of transformation and change processes were already the main focus of many psychological, economic or sociological theories (e.g. Kubler-Ross, Hopson, Lewin, etc.), Mezirow's interest is on changing meaning as a way to generate transformation. Two domains, the educational context and the psychoanalytic treatment, have highest relevance for his discourse addressed to professionals: educators, counsellors, psychologists, trainers who are interested in assisting the learner in identifying frames of reference by which he/she construes meaning. In this way, personal and cultural transformations can be created.

Mezirow collects both his ideas and his allies to produce a book on critical thinking and self-reflection where his thoughts emerge. The list of other names he gathers is impressive; Mezirow is the mind behind the action and the editor of the book. The premise is that the adult learner looks at self-agency - and at - ways to overcome the current domination of imposed ideology by an emancipatory form of learning.

Fostering Critical Reflection is not filled with statistical data nor axioms. It does not give step-by-step instructions like a cook-book, but it overshadows "an emerging transformation theory of adult learning in which the construing of meaning is of central importance" (Mezirow, 1990b, p.18). The explanation of his theory is limited to the first chapter - 20 pages in total - in which Mezirow provides a theoretical framework for the concept of critical reflection. The emancipative and critical dimensions of adult education - defined as "an organized effort to precipitate or to facilitate transformative learning in others" (Mezirow, 1990a, p.XVI) are explored through 16 different chapters.

The introduction lists the six key ideas of Mezirow's theory: meaning perspective - transformative learning - emancipatory education – reflection - critical reflection - self-reflection.

Somewhat combining the final two, Mezirow says that Transformative Learning is the "process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective" (Mezirow, 1990a, p. XVI). In his chapter, Mezirow states his hope that he has sketched a theory to be put into practice, that he speaks of things that emerged from his practice, that his words are targeted at practitioners, that as his words become practice the results - as a collective political action - become a true force of change in modern society.

In 1991, to give a firm foundation to his ideas Mezirow (1991a) publishes *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. This book – the only one written as author - - delineates his philosophy of adult education and provides a model from where to derive adult education practices and that can be used to develop adult education programs. Mezirow states that Transformation Theory is a theory on adult learning born from his 'nonconformist ideas' and that the theory is open to debate in the educational and scientific community and to probable revisions. Mezirow admits his theory has some roots in Habermas, but that he has detached from the Frankfurt school to enlarge his model's by looking at works of other scholars even in non-educational domains. The result is a theoretical synthesis that is not tied to any other philosophy, is not systematically derived from any other theory, is not reliant on any other single author, is not dependent on any one discipline, and is not strictly tied to any intellectual tradition. The book is not just the outcome of Mezirow's studies in the last decade: his wife Edee's completion of university studies plays a part; spending a sabbatical leave working with the psychiatrist Gould plays a part; conferences he attends in Europe and around the world play a part; as do studies of Paulo Freire, and of Ivan Illich.

All of these helped, but the inspiration to write the book came from Jossey Bass the publisher who asked him to take a position in the adult education debate by writing a systematic and complete general model. The publisher encouraged Mezirow throughout, and when the book was finished they published it; positive reactions accompanied the release of his volume. Mezirow dedicates the second half of the 1990s to the socio-political ramifications of his new theory. He reshapes his reference framework no longer within the (adult) learning theories but on a broader vision of the philosophy of science, challenging the objectivist paradigm, which characterized Western rationalistic tradition since the Enlightenment.

Mezirow's 'cognitive revolution' is represented by the interpretive/theoretical framework (Creswell, Poth, 2018, p.8): hermeneutics, phenomenology, social cognition, deconstructionism break the objective correspondence between language, knowledge and reality and converge on critical rationality. The emancipatory paradigm calls for critical understanding of reality because "can free us from the tyranny and the bondage of false opinion" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 9). So, Mezirow goes beyond andragogy and self-directed learning affirming that Transformation Theory must incorporate "the study of nomological regularities and the interpretative learning insights of the cognitive revolution" (Mezirow, 1996, p.10). Thus, the Transformation theory is defined by Mezirow as a reconstructive theory that defines a model, not unique and stable but abstract, idealized, non-definitive, with constructs and categories useful to explain how adults can learn and change during the life course.

According to this ideographical approach, Mezirow grounds the scientific validity of his theory on two elements: the critical reflection, and the dialogue and the empathy with the community. Twenty years after his early studies, Mezirow declares Transformative Learning has definitely become an adult learning theory. This announcement is published in 2000 in a collection of the communications of the First International Conference on Transformative Learning held at Columbia University in 1998. The book title is *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. Mezirow himself is the editor of this book with Associates.

Starting from his 'ambitious study' of women returning to school as adults, Mezirow reviews the history of his 'modest movement' (Mezirow, 2000a, p. XI) still in progress. He reviews the influence on it by some scholars' books, at how some key concepts and values have grown since the beginning, and how the 6 key ideas of the 90's have been developed into more core-concepts: 'conscientization', development, discourse, self-reflection, emancipation, freedom, empathy, social justice, rationality. The final chapter of the book summarizes his theory according to the final synthesis presented during the New York conference.



Mezirow writes that the purpose of the conference was to compose the 'puzzle' of his theory, clarifying its conditions by the contributions from the participants' community involved (Wiessner, Mezirow, 2000, p.332).

In the 'Theory Building', Mezirow admits some important issues remain unresolved and some concepts are not yet clearly elucidated, but he declares "each part of the Transformative Learning puzzle that is clarified opens the door to new areas of exploration and further expansion of the theory" (Wiessner, Mezirow, 2000, p.343). The Habermas's concept of constructive science is used to explain the generative and constructive nature of transformational model. Transformative Theory is not validated according to the measurement methods of empirical-analytical research but through qualitative studies and through educational practices and experiences; this type of validation process is led by continuous outcomes offered by adult educators, by practical criteria, and by the 'best reflective judgement' of those directly interested in his model.

Mezirow wants to give consistency to his theory by a qualitative process of revision and dialogue within a learning community not through a statistical approach to data, according to the idea of a learning community developed during the New York conference. Learning to think like an adult, the first chapter of the text, gives a thirty-page synthesis of how the theory functions based on this co-constructive model (Mezirow, 2000b). He wants 'epistemology in motion', with methods formulated and verified through pragmatic 'tests of functionality' that will be true or justified (and proved to be so) through professional criteria and discourses (Wiessner, Mezirow, 2000, p. 346-347). Epistemology, which permits co-construction of a 'comprehensive theory' that is linked to practice, and requires collaboration between disciplines, clear dangers of fragmentation. Indeed, years along, many things claiming roots in Transformative Learning have sometimes been little to do with any of Mezirow's original thoughts.

## An open and self-governing theory

The Columbia conference made Mezirow aware of the scientific community's great interest in his model on adult learning. Subsequent biannual conferences, since 1998 until the present day, develop and further the theory according to a centrifugal mechanism: collaborative inquiry fosters connections between scholars, practitioners, ideas, experiences. The first aim of the international conferences is to summarize decades of studies done on Transformative Learning. The second aim is to identify open topics needing discussion, and to examine emerging changes. The most significant points for discussion emerged from Columbia Conference were the process and context of transformation; the formulation of assumptions in the theory; the dimensions of transformation. In discussing and in revising the linguistic aspects required to avoid 'unfamiliar jargon': meaning perspective is replaced with frames of reference that include habits of mind and point of view which together make up meaning schemes. The most discussed topics at the conference are critical reflection and self-reflection. The theory remains open to the process of co-construction but Mezirow no longer works on it and this is after the book of 2000. He did not want to nor know how to take control of the new theoretical synthesis developed at the 1998 conference. He did write it down - he did bring all the threads of that conference together, and after that book gave up control to the community because he considered the theory to be 'self-governing'. Mezirow's theory turned in Transformative Learning Theory, up to the disciples.

International conferences on Theory of Transformation serve as places to present hypotheses, as places to show the research proofs that validate and justify new hypotheses. These conferences give the theory room to expand. Different institutions are already set to host the International Conference on Transformative Learning in San Francisco, Toronto, Albuquerque, Lansing, Bermuda, New York, Athens, Tacoma. Each meeting will gradually increase the number of participants coming from different parts of the world and with a particular interest those from the North American learning communities.

Transformative learning has become a sort of an umbrella-theory (Grabove, 1997): the theory is partially inspired by the core concepts enunciated by Mezirow after the Columbia Conference because it is developed by scholars in various fields according to different approaches. Mezirow (1997b) doesn't update directly the state of the art of the conceptualization and neither the numerous integrations done by different applications of the theory. Nine years after the first conference, in 2007, Mezirow does consider reframing his model so it "help learners cope with a frightening, rapidly changing world [...]to deal with such a high-risk society" (Mezirow, 2007, p.10).

His theory will be carried on by his students. It is already independent from Mezirow himself because different interpretations of the theory coexist. Taylor (1998) reviews from the theoretical and empirical literature four main autonomous development areas - psychocritical, psychodevelopmental, psychanalytic, social emancipatory. Taylor (2017) states almost 10 different approaches and scholars dedicated as: Psycho-Critical (Mezirow); Analytical depth psychology (Dirkx, Cranton); Developmental (Kegan; Taylor & Elias); Race-Centric (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred); Cultural Spiritual (Tisdell, English); Planetary (O'Sullivan); Feminist (English); Emancipatory (Freire); Neurobiological (Janik); Post-Colonial (Lange); New Science (Lange, Tyler & Swartz, Adlhadeff-Jones).

30 years on from its foundation, Transformative Learning has become an autonomous Transformative Pedagogy. There is a need to systematize how to evaluate or validate the theory and how the model is applied to enable people to discover and learn for themselves. Consequently, Mezirow and Taylor (2009) worked on a book dedicated to transformative practices implemented in higher education, the workplace, and in communities. In this book emerges that Transformative Learning is no longer than a theoretical construct because it has become a standard for practice in a wide range of different fields.

Transformative Learning in Practice is not introduced by a Mezirow's chapter (Taylor, 2009). The book reminds Transformative Learning practitioners of the core-concepts in the original framework and works to shift application of the theory away from its epistemological and back to its methodological basis. Mezirow (2009, p.28) briefly presents an overview of his 'original' model referring to the key-elements expressed ten years before in his chapter Learning to Think like an Adult (Mezirow, 2000b). The usability of the theory seems to be more significant than the conformity to the author's thought, given the idea of the transformation of meaning which can be applied beyond its theoretical background in different fields (psychology, educational sciences, HDR, sociology, psychoanalysis, food and environmental studies, etc.) because is concerning adult change.

Transformative Learning's global diffusion, not limited to English-speaking countries, has changed it from a learning theory into a methodological approach to teaching adults. Thus, the crucial issues of Transformative Learning in Practice are to synthesize multiple conceptual orientations, and to align practical applications. The split between the theory and its later and different theorizations needs to be closed, as does the split between the original framework and its various applications (Taylor, 2009) generates an explosion of methods, settings and tools. This book tries to set up the reunion of a main bifurcation emerged. The orthodox branch must surely belong to Mezirow and his direct students (Edward Taylor, John Dirkx, Patricia Cranton). These writers emphasize personal growth and individual transformation. The second major branch (championed by Tisdell, Johnson-Bailey, and Alfred) seeks social change, and increasing political and ideological consciousness.

As the popularity of Transformative Learning increases, its epistemological coherence reduces; Mezirow himself was surprised that his conceptualization had become the dominant adult teaching and learning paradigm (Mezirow, Taylor, 2009, p.XI). Transformative Learning theory takes the place of Andragogy and of Behaviorism - initially joined or criticized by Mezirow - and now is celebrate as dominant mainstream in adult education. Reasons underline this exponential reputation of Transformative Learning, reasons that correspond to the main risks: theory actually becomes independent of its author as a wide-ranging framework on transformation processes.

Hoggan argues that "Mezirow's definition of transformative learning was explicit enough to provide parameters, but he did not insist on those parameters to other scholars who engaged him in the development of the theory" (Hoggan, 2016, p.60). But, Hoggan claims, if a theory became so extensive, it is no longer necessary to use it because the explanation of the phenomena or the description of the data could be distorted or useless because of extensive or broad criteria. More interpretations of the concepts and contradictory applications of the theory can affect or interrogate the scientific value of the theory itself.

Few years after Transformative Learning in Practice, a new focus is needed. In 2012, the Handbook of Transformative Learning arises with a dual need: to give consistency to different and relevant approaches and to introduce new directions. The Handbook wants to go beyond (not to reduce) dualities and contradictions. It grants equal rights of coexistence to different theoretical perspectives. The incipient Mezirow's disease forces the two main students to collect his legacy. In this Handbook, Taylor and Cranton attempt to create a unified framework in which different viewpoints can be examined. Such epistemological unity is no longer possible, so the chapter Thinking like an adult written by Mezirow in 2000 is offered once again as a reminder for the original scheme of 'Transformation Theory'.

The editors introduce the history of the theory, its approach, its original link with constructivism and humanism, and they summarize its advancements and stages (Taylor, Cranton, 2012; Taylor, Snyders, 2012). To well explain the state of the art of the theory, Tisdell (2012) uses a metaphor applying it to the musical field; she explains how wider variations and themes of Transformative Learning reproduce 'multi-facets' of an adult's life: individual experience, social change, rational and irrational dimensions, consciousness and self-reflection.

Taylor and Cranton do not want to reduce the multiple approaches of Transformative Learning that have emerged through the decades of applied research; they want to point out approaches that have 'forced' the theory into a specific disciplinary perspective, and those that have produced only partially connected to the reference framework. Taylor and Cranton argue that after forty years of exponential growth, Mezirow's thought does not need (epistemological) consolidation but an evolution.

They suggest a rethinking and updating of some foundations in the original framework. They select five (new) key-points of the Transformative Learning Theory 'in progress' such as: experience; empathy; desire to change/motivation; inherently good

transformation; research methodology (Taylor, Cranton, 2013). In urging a look at these five central points, Cranton and Taylor (2012) want to stimulate scholars, practitioners, and educators to enter a deep analysis of the Mezirowian theory. Hoggan (2016) sees a split in the future of Transformative Learning into both a synthetic and an analytic meta-theory: on one hand it can be considered as a theory on adult learning; on the other hand, it can be considered a methodological approach, a way to describe learning outcomes according to a critical and participatory way.

## Revising of the Theory

Critics of Transformative Learning Theory are fewer today than its enthusiastic supporters. During the last 20 years, over hundreds of studies have been carried out using the theory, increasing expansion in research, needed repeatedly to point out Mezirow's theorization, synthesizing the salient concepts and the evolution of his theory (Kitchenham, 2008; Taylor, Snyders, 2012).

Other reviewers have highlighted variations over the decades: a first wave closely linked to Mezirow's disciples; a second wave that integrates and introduces new perspectives apart from original constructs. The third wave came from outside his student body and introduced perspectives that differed from the original constructs and many of these (not all of them) have been integrated into the original theory. Despite Mezirow, the popularity Transformative Learning has created a theory à la carte, where anyone from any disciplinary field can take what they want from the model and adapt it to the learning objectives of their field - so long as their new idea is identified with participative teaching methods. Today, the words Transformative Learning are used as a master key throughout adult education. Today far from Mezirow's intentions, his theory has grown into the Pedagogy of Transformation.

Trying to 'protect' the theory from its still increasing conceptual fragmentation, Mezirow's students Ed Taylor and Patricia Cranton put focus on these crucial questions: "What does transformation learning mean? When we use the phrase, what we are talking about? (Taylor, Cranton, 2013, p.11). They argue that many criticisms of Transformative Learning are simplistic, are based on indirect sources, and can raise useless debate. They argue that multiple approaches can be a scientific advantage when - and if - they vitalize transformation. They also point out some stagnation in epistemological aspects of research brought on by the need for continuous integrations of new versions produced by the community of scholars and practitioners.

Some believe Mezirow's focus on cognitive aspects of the transformation process must be extended to extra-rational perspectives (Kucukaydin, Cranton, 2012; Dirxk, 2006). Some scholars see a need to re-conceptualize some dimensions not developed in the original model but important in today's adult education: continuum, intersubjectivity, emancipatory praxis (Hoggan, Mälkki, Finnegan, 2017). The first critics to Mezirow's model came in 90s; Clark and Wilson (1991) criticized the lack of contextual elements used in defining Transformative Learning as a model of rationality applied to experience. Mezirow responded to their claim by announcing the publication of Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning. In this 1991 book, Mezirow notes the sociolinguistic dimension required in the process of making meaning will be emphasized. (Mezirow, 1991b).

Mezirow's idea of a social and cultural community of learning which he did develop was criticized by some scholars for its impossibly idealistic values: solidarity, caring, freedom, tolerance, equity, etc. Mezirow writes in response that "the ideal conditions of human discourse [are] an ideal society composed of communities of learners engaged in a continuous collaborative inquiry to determine the truth or arrive at a tentative best judgement about alternative beliefs" (Mezirow, 2007, 16-17). Inspired by those values, Mezirow (1997a) argues that the process of making meaning is rooted in a social system that couldn't always be responsive to the human rights and needs of individuals, and within a historical and cultural framework.

Mezirow confronted a significant disputation started by Michael Newman (2012a; 2012b) who attacked the social and 'socialist' dimensions in the Transformative Learning model. Newman recognizes that Mezirow has introduced not just a new theory but a new language and a new 'intellectual rigor' to all future discourse on adult education. Still, Newman wonders if Transformative Learning become so 'attractive' by offering the 'magic touch' of transformation by a sorcerer's wand (Newman, 2014). Newman writes that the adjective 'transformative' in Mezirow's theory should be replaced by the adjective 'good', because this term best relates to the 'realistic' results of each learning model that focuses on adults' self-awareness, reflection and openness. Rather than a theory, Transformative Learning would be considered as a construct to explain ex-post an educational phenomenon as the change. Newman argues that Transformative Learning deals with the illusion of solving the complexity of human change and development by reducing it, simplistically, to a transformation in meaning. Thus, Newman suggests to replace the theory name with Inappropriate Learning, given the difficulties in controlling and in providing the adults' meaning processes as well



the multiple methods and approaches (instrumental, artistic, spiritual, psychoanalytic, etc.) to foster the transformation of meaning perspectives.

The core reflective and critical reassessments of meaning perspectives asks adults to start from their historical, biographical, and contextual reference structures. These are structures in which adults have been embedded since childhood and as adults they might and should be able to criticize and move away from. Newman believes the conceptual model over-focuses on the individual and requires the presence of others only as a means of verifying the learner's own personal considerations. Adult finding a false assumption in a meaning premise feels cathartic, but it is in fact a solipsistic experience; Transformation theory risks to switch in a 'self-development program' without compromise or mediation with the 'ideal community' of social discourse. The idea of a learner as a reflective and dialogic thinker appears unrealistic, requiring a world of adults naturally able to think as adults, criticizing their own perspectives of meaning.

Mezirow's theory cannot succeed worldwide because it is built for 1970's North American adults and does not consider the worldwide differences in adult life where the North American liberal tradition does not govern, and deep inequalities by race and gender, in sociocultural norms, and economic conditions exist. Mezirow was inspired by humanistic fundamentals developed according to a constructivist approach; he postulates each adult is able to transform his/her inner potential getting beyond contextual barriers and personal limits as a continuous and endless effort (Taylor, Elias, 2012). Does inner potential transform or does each adult have the possibility to transform getting beyond contextual, historical and biographical barriers? If getting beyond individual meaning perspectives makes transformation take place, do false limits fall? Transformative Learning seems to be a continuing way out of prison instead of a forevermore burden. Mezirow replied to these charges insisting that Transformative Theory is characterized by a range of convenience due to its nature: a theory for educators, elaborated through the practical experience of these professionals.

Furthermore, Mezirow did not question the levels, impact and quality of transformation (Brookfield, 2000) produced by critical revision of meaning perspectives. There might be a form of learning generated without a ten steps process elaborated by Mezirow or transformation can occur in a 'silent' way, by an intuitive self-discovery or without a dialogue with others (Jullien, 2009). Similarly, critical self-reflection does not automatically produce learning, and neither it can be mechanically identified with learning. So, reflection may be confused with a monologue or an emotional soliloquy, trivialized or even distorted in justifying transformative outcomes.

Questioning perspectives of reference through a disorienting dilemma, appears to be very close to the idea of incoherence produced by a 'cognitive dissonance'. Indeed, the theory elaborated by Leon Festinger (1973) at the end of the 50s affirms that limiting the contradiction produced, and the consequent psychological discomfort, individuals tend to preserve attitudes and behaviors to avoid changes or questioning. This theory explains, from a different perspective, the resistance to transformation, focusing on it with the psychological and cognitive processes of the adult's development.

According to Tennant (2012), Transformative Learning supposes that the adult is always in the 'optimal' conditions for understanding, managing, learning from himself/herself, mostly during crucial moments of life course transitions, during crisis or traumatic and painful events. This issue isn't realistic. Another discussion issue between scholars concerns the role of adult educator. Mezirow (1991) admits that adult educator is not a neutral agent, but that he is not an indoctrinator. Moreover, the adult educator is not an objective spectator; it's a participant involved in adult's transformation carrying in it his/her own perspectives of meaning and influencing the training process and its interpretations or impact.

This professional figure is defined by Mezirow as an active agent of cultural change, charged in fostering adult's self-reflection, in offering opportunities for individual development and for the creation of active democracy conditions. The pedagogical limits and the ethics threats of this approach appear evident to Mezirow himself. Adult change can't be 'forced' but can only be facilitated by the educator, because transformation must be voluntary, conscious, and critical (Cranton, 2006).

## European Perspectives of Mezirow's theory

Transformative Learning develops mainly in North America. After its great success, Taylor and Cranton (2013) have cited ProQuest database analysing five years - from 2008 to 2013 -, discovering 120 dedicated articles and 1300 papers that refer to or apply the theory. However, the two scholars claim the limited use of Mezirow's books and chapters as primary sources materials and underline some methodological limitations in application-oriented uses of the theory. In general, studies relate to a qualitative and interpretative nature. The most frequent approach is based on observations or experiments, describing

some stories or interviews that do not always have validity and reliability beyond the subjective or local levels.

Until 2010, Mezirow's theory has been welcomed warmly in Europe; increasingly it has become important mainly through the North American research. Kokkos (2014) emphasizes how the two adult education traditions - American and European - are oriented to diverging perspectives: one is linked to job and production; the other is rooted in the Enlightenment, humanist and social tradition. In his opinion, this fact explains the late European appreciation of Transformative Learning and difficulties its specific vocabulary/lexicon. Another element that slows down the spread of Transformative Learning is the lack of translations of the primary sources: most of Mezirow's publications are not available in other languages than English.

In 2011, for the first time, the tenth International Conference on Transformative Learning was held in Europe, hosted in Athens by the Hellenic Adult Association. Thirteen years after the first conference in 1998, interest in Transformative Learning reaches Europe in a conference where the participants come from 27 different countries. The conference aims to give researchers and practitioners an opportunity to reflect on how transformation and learning occur together in the adult life (Alhadeff-Jones, Kokkos 2011). Athens Conference topics are the influence of North American scholars in the spread of the theory Transformative Learning and the divergences between the North American tradition and European scholars' interpretation of the theory. Kokkos and Koulaouzides (2011) highlight that European scholars or educators were less influenced by the Mezirow's framework than from the works of his North American students. European version also puts together Transformative Learning with European philosophical tradition and educational approaches.

In 2014, a new conference in Athens (What's the point of Transformative Learning?) inaugurated the ESREA network specifically dedicated (Andritsakou, West 2014); Transformational Theory has captured the interest of European scholars when, in 2016, the second ESREA network conference was held in Athens - The Role, Nature and Difficulties of Dialogue in TL (Andritsakou, Kostara, 2016); in 2018 the third one took place in Milan, Italy.

In English speaking countries, such as Ireland or Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the spread of Transformative theory has been facilitated through the access to original sources. In general, there have been few translations of Mezirow's writings in other languages and this was a negative factor. In Spain, for example, there are no translated texts, so the penetration of the theory has been greatly slowed down.

In Italy, the 1991 book *Fostering Transformative Learning* that explains Mezirow's theory, has been translated only in 2003 with the title *Apprendimento e Trasformazione*. A new text that collects Mezirow's writings and articles was edited in 2016 and it now facilitates the increasing value of Transformative Learning as a research approach of Education of the Adults within some Italian universities. Unlike in Italy, Transformative Learning in Greece has not developed in the academic world but among educators and adult associations that had hosted Mezirow during his visit to Greece in the Nineties

In France, the 1991 book *Fostering Transformative Learning* was translated in 2001 with the title *Penser son Expérience*. Unlike in Italy, French scholars didn't create a dedicated network or national association on Transformative Learning, but the interest on it was combined with French research mainstreams in adult education field as self-directed learning (autoformation) (Eneau, 2017) and biographical learning (*histoires de vie*). This has created new and interesting contaminations between versions, cultural traditions and reference authors. In Germany, the 1997 book was *Transformative Erwachsenenbildung*. In this country, more than attempting to align it with the North American version, as it happened in Italy, an epistemological connection was suggested.

The framework of Transformative Learning and the German tradition of *Bildung* have been matched, opening a dialogue between the two cultural (and geographical) traditions. The two are integrated, with their features and compared in empirical findings and theoretical assumptions, sharing common ground and aims in a globalized context (Gonon, 2017). The notion of *Bildung* (that has no literal translation into English) traditionally denotes to "processes of interpretation, understanding, or appropriation (*Aneignung*) of the knowledge that transforms the learner's personality" (Laros, Fuhr, Taylor, 2017, p. IX). *Bildung* meets Transformative Learning in processes of deep analysis, reconstruction, transformation of meaning that involves learner's personality. Two theories are studied in relation to each other despite differences in some areas as: research methodologies, theoretical framework, language, stage of life covered, practices. Furthermore, *Bildung* is considered as a transformative process (Koller, 2017) because it engages an individual development that can change the way individual relates to himself, to others and to the word. As a theory of learning and teaching adults, *Bildung* deals with human thinking and acting; it requires the pedagogical support of educators in helping adults to revise/re-examine their meaning perspectives, especially in experiences of crises, fostering critical reflection and social action (Ludwig, 2017). Dialogue between European and American theories can build new research strands and new starting points for the ongoing international perspective on Transformative Learning.

## Conclusion

This paper showed how the birth of the Transformative Theory was long, incidental and initially connected to the andragogy. Subsequently, the theory has condensed around some milestones, reaching a specific configuration in Mezirow's thoughts as: the perspectives of meaning, the transformation process, the disorienting dilemma, the critical reflection, the shared dialogue with the others. During four decades, Transformative Learning has expanded, making multiple interpretative versions coexist and characterized by approaches and epistemologies also opposed to each other.

The paper shows the progressive importance of Transformative Learning as a model of reference in the field of contemporary adult education. Transformative Learning has become a theory in an 'almost independent' way from its own creator by recursive expansions that have deepened some aspects or applied it in different domains. Going 'beyond' its own discoverer, Transformative Learning maintains during decades some key concepts, amplified in numerous approaches. Mezirow's thought is the background horizon where research drawings and various applications are labelled as 'transformative practices' (Quinn, Sinclair, 2016).

Transformative Learning theory is not a puzzle. Despite Mezirow's own image, it seems like a bush, a single trunk that subdivides into a complex process comparable to trees branches. It does not develop by linear evolution from an original stock, but as a generation of diversified branches, produced by ramification, that maintain sometimes few lines of contact with the base. Transformative Learning can be considered as an adult learning theory with a 'variable geometry'. Variations focused around two main Mezirow's basic notions: the transformation of meaning perspectives and critical reflection.

In the contemporary field of adult education, Mezirow's theory provides a congruent, consistent and effective paradigm (Montuschi, 2003, Buscemi, Pieri, 2004) useful to give explanatory value to experiences on how/why the adult learns and transforms (Mezirow, 2007, p.10). Today, the prominence of Transformative Learning is not in its methodological dimension or its scientific structure. Mezirow's theory is the best conceptualization to explain and summarize the impact of transformation during the different situations of adult life course.

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