

## **The transformative potential of adult literacy learning**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the potential of literacy education to promote transformative learning in adults. Transformative learning theory is a flourishing area of research in adult education, and is concerned with describing and analysing fundamental changes in how adults view themselves and their world. According to the leading theorist of transformative learning, Jack Mezirow, literacy education has unique transformative potential. Although there is little research on this question, the available studies suggest that there is enormous potential for literacy education to act as a catalyst for transformative learning in adults.*

### **Introduction**

This paper will explore the potential of literacy education to promote transformative learning in adults. Transformative learning theory is a flourishing area of research in adult education. It is concerned with deep shifts in how adults view themselves and their world. A range of life experiences may trigger these ‘transformations’, with participation in educational activities one of the most common and well-studied. Most of the research into transformative learning to date has focused on fostering transformative learning in formal higher education and professional development settings (Taylor 2007). However, scattered research efforts have investigated transformative learning in adult literacy programs (e.g. King & Wright 2003). Other research, while not conducted within the transformative learning paradigm, can also throw light on transformative experiences within literacy education (e.g. Malicky & Katz 1997). Research into second language learning, too, can have implications for transformative learning in the literacy setting (e.g. King 2000). What all of these studies reveal is the enormous potential for adult literacy education to act as a catalyst and conduit for transformative learning. At the same time, this research has implications for the debate surrounding the role of critical reflection in the transformative process.

### **What is Transformative Learning?**

Transformative learning theory emerged onto the adult education scene in the 1970s when Jack Mezirow published his research into women’s re-entry programs in community colleges in the United States. However, as Merriam and Caffarella (1999) point out, the work of Paulo Freire may also be classed as transformative learning theory, and Mezirow himself acknowledges the importance for the development of his theory of Freire. Many literacy educators will be aware of Freire’s (1970) pioneering work with economically disadvantaged people in South America. His theory of education has a strong focus on changing social

structures through the use of education. Freire's contribution to the theory of literacy education lies in his development of an educative process that involves basing curriculum development on learner concerns in the local context, and building literacy capability with a view to localised social action (1970: 95-109) However, the contemporary prominence of transformative learning in the field of adult education is due rather to the prolific work of Mezirow. Compared to Freire's overtly social-activist approach, Mezirow places greater emphasis on changes in the individual, and abides by an ethos of the adult educator as someone who is obliged to empower the learner but who should not attempt to influence the learner's subsequent course of action (2000: 30).

Mezirow's original research picked up on the fact that many of the participants in courses designed to facilitate the entry of women into higher education experienced dramatic changes in how they understood themselves and the world. He termed these deep shifts 'perspective transformations'. Mezirow (1978: 11) observed that '[t]he process of perspective transformation begins when a woman becomes aware of the ways cultural assumptions and their psychological consequences have placed their stamp upon her.' This process of recognising the distorting power of tacit assumptions lead Mezirow's subjects into a 'disorienting dilemma', the first of his 10 phases of perspective transformation. The other phases he identified in the process of perspective transformation are:

- Self examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
- Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- Planning a course of action
- Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
- Provisional trying of new roles
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (1991: 168-169)

It should be noted that Mezirow did not believe that every learner experiencing perspective transformation necessarily passed through all of these phases, or that the phases were invariably traversed in this order. (1978: 16) However, he did think that his scheme of phases

helped to illuminate transformative learning, and that some of the phases were essential to the process, such as the disorienting dilemma and critical assessment of assumptions.

Mezirow's picture of the adult learner emphasises the structural importance of perspectives, which he also calls 'meaning perspectives' and 'frames of reference'. In the early study he offered the following definition:

A meaning perspective is the structure of psychocultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated to past experience. It is a way of seeing yourself and your relationships. More than that, it establishes the criteria that determine what you will experience – criteria for identifying what you will find interesting, for deciding which problems are of concern to you, for determining what you are prepared to learn and from whom, for determining values, for setting priorities for action, and for defining the meaning and direction of self-fulfillment and personal success. (1978: 11)

Meaning perspectives are clearly fundamental to the identity of the individual. It is also obvious that adults will tend to hold on to meaning perspectives and add to them. Indeed, in Mezirow's theory, strengthening and adding to existing meaning perspectives characterises much adult learning.

In Mezirow's developed theory of transformative learning published in 1991, he distinguishes between meaning perspectives and 'meaning schemes'. He explains that 'each meaning perspective is made up of a number of meaning schemes' (1991: 44). Meaning schemes he defines as 'specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings...' (1991: 5). They are '...the concrete manifestations of our habitual orientations and expectations (meaning perspectives) and translate these general expectations into specific ones that guide our actions.' (1991: 44) One form of learning described by Mezirow involves 'learning to further differentiate and elaborate the previously acquired meaning schemes that we take for granted, or learning within the structure of our acquired frame of reference' (1991: 93). This type of learning confirms our existing meaning perspectives. For example, when we learn a way to improve an existing skill we are extending established meaning schemes and working within the comfortable boundaries of our frames of reference. A second form of learning identified by Mezirow also serves to strengthen our meaning perspectives. 'Learning new meaning

schemes' takes place when new content is encountered that is compatible with existing perspectives. (1991: 93) Mezirow thought of this kind of learning, for instance learning a new work role, as extending and reinforcing but not challenging our meaning perspectives.

Challenges to existing meaning perspectives begin with a third kind of learning which takes place through transformation of meaning schemes (1991: 94). In this kind of learning, a specific meaning scheme we encounter conflicts with an existing meaning scheme. Mezirow illustrates this kind of learning with the example of 'a woman attending an early evening class at a local college who feels obligated to rush home to prepare dinner for her husband [who] may come to question the meaning scheme that produces that compulsion as she encounters other women who do not feel a need to fulfill this stereotypical sex role.' (1991: 94) If the transformation of a meaning scheme remains an isolated event, then this kind of learning may produce some discomfort because it is not compatible with the meaning perspective of which the original meaning scheme formed part. However, an 'accretion' of meaning scheme transformations can precipitate the fourth kind of learning: learning through perspective transformation.

As Mezirow explains (1991: 94), learning through perspective transformation

...begins when we encounter experiences, often in an emotionally charged situation, that fail to fit our expectations and consequently lack meaning for us, or we encounter an anomaly that cannot be given coherence either by learning within existing schemes or by learning new schemes. Illumination comes only through a redefinition of the problem. Redefinition in turn is achieved by critically reassessing the assumptions that support the current meaning scheme(s) in question.

In the above example of the female student who questions the need to rush home to prepare her husband's dinner, Mezirow observes that a number of such meaning schemes may come into question at around the same time, setting the stage for perspective transformation.

Mezirow envisages these four forms of learning as taking place across broad 'domains' of learning. His theory of learning domains is influenced by the work of the critical philosopher Jurgen Habermas, who distinguished instrumental, communicative and emancipatory types of knowledge. Mezirow transformed these concepts to produce a theory of learning domains. In

this theory, *instrumental learning* refers to learning to control and manipulate the environment while *communicative learning* refers to the dynamics of learning to understand others (1991: 73). A third domain, *emancipatory learning* involves gaining freedom from ‘forces that limit our options and our rational control over our lives but have been taken for granted or seen as beyond human control’ (1991: 87). Obviously, the concept of emancipatory learning derived from Habermas coincides with the concept of transformative learning by critical reflection on assumptions. Another important concept in Mezirow’s theory, also borrowed from Habermas, is that all human communication is subject to the implicit rules of rational discourse. This means that when we partake in social discourse we implicitly make ‘validity claims’ and assess the implicit validity claims made by others. In other words, anything we communicate carries a message about the truth of what we are saying or writing. Engaging in communication thus involves reflecting on our own and others’ assumptions. Because Mezirow thinks that communicative learning necessarily brings learners under the sway of the implicit demands of rational discourse, and because rational discourse involves reflecting on the assumptions underlying our communications, he believes that communicative learning is continuous with emancipatory learning. Mezirow provides guidelines for educators to help bring about the ‘ideal conditions of rational discourse’ that will facilitate transformative learning. He suggests that learners should be fully informed about issues, open to alternative viewpoints, able to make justified inferences and analyse and reason argumentatively, aware of and able to manage emotions, empathetic, and granted full equity in discourse and free of coercion and distorting self-deception (1996: 6-7). According to Mezirow, these ‘ideal conditions of rational discourse’ can already be found operating in university seminars and court rooms (1996: 7).

Mezirow emphasises the predominantly rational process of critical assessment of assumptions in the process of learning through meaning scheme or perspective transformation. He differentiates three kinds of reflection: content reflection (where we ask questions about *what* an issue is), process reflection (where we ask questions about *how* we deal with issues), and premise reflection (where we ask about the *why* of issues). Mezirow explains that premise reflection is the kind of cognitive process that underpins critical reflection and transformative learning. He later distinguishes between ‘objective reframing’ and ‘subjective reframing’ as two kinds of questioning that can lead to transformative learning (2000: 23). Objective reframing refers to critical reflection on the assumption of others, while subjective reframing involves the critique of our own assumptions. Mezirow is adamant that perspective

transformation cannot take place without critical reflection on assumptions, even though he conceded that non-rational processes may play some role in the overall course of transformative learning (Cranton 2006b: 125).

An important issue in any consideration of transformative learning theory is the fact that perspective transformation can be a painful process for learners. This is perhaps to be expected when one reflects on how a meaning perspective is so bound up with the identity of an adult. Through the formative years of childhood we laboriously build up the meaning perspectives that go on permeate every aspect of our being. Meaning perspectives are complex, with emotional, cognitive and social components. Therefore, it is a very significant event in the life of an adult to find their meaning perspectives challenged, and then perhaps to embark on a process of perspective transformation. The literature of transformative learning theory contains frequent acknowledgements of the difficulties experienced by learners undergoing transformation. Mezirow himself quotes a description of transformation as entailing ‘shock and devastation, pain and rejection, immobilization and depression...’ (1991: 169).

This ‘dark side’ of transformative learning (Cranton 2006a: 159) throws into relief a lingering question concerning the ethics of promoting perspective transformation. While some writers on transformative learning enthusiastically advocate an active role for the educator in precipitating perspective transformation in adult learners (e.g. Newman 1993), most researchers stress the aspect of learner choice in the matter (e.g. Cranton 2006a), although there is a widely held conviction among transformative educators that it is implicit in the mission of adult education that adult learners should engage in questioning assumptions and that adult educators are obliged to encourage this process (e.g. Mezirow 1991: 223). However, regardless of the stance educators take toward their responsibilities in the context of transformative learning, it remains impossible to predict perspective transformation. As Mezirow (1991: 202) states, ‘[p]erspective transformation is a mode of adult learning that neither learner nor educator is able to anticipate or evoke upon demand.’ Thus it is out of the question to stipulate perspective transformation as an ‘outcome’ of any learning program. The ultimate uniqueness of the constitution of each person’s meaning perspectives, and the complexity of factors that determine the ‘ripeness’ of an individual for perspective transformation impose a significant limitation on the transformative intent of educators and their curricula. The transformational educator must rest content with patiently arranging

conditions, exercising vigilance, and at the right time stimulating processes (or not, depending on their moral stance) that then may involve them in providing sensitive support for what may be an emotionally demanding period for the learner.

A final issue to be discussed in this section concerns the relative significance of factors contributing to perspective transformation from within the educational program and those from without. In his early research Mezirow (1978: 12) noted that ‘the disturbing event’ triggering perspective transformation ‘was often external in origin – the death of a husband, a divorce, the loss of a job, a change of city of residence, retirement, an empty nest, a remarriage...’ etc. However, participation in education can allow adult learners a different view on such life experiences, while there may be specific learning activities that stimulate critical reflection which in turn can be directed upon disturbing events. It is probably accurate to say that a complementary relationship holds between external and educational influences on possible transformative learning processes. It may be that the adult is already experiencing some disturbance in the structures of meaning in their lives (and such events are often a reason for embarking on formal learning), or they may bring stable perspectives to the situation. Either way, the educational setting can serve to heighten the disturbance, create a disturbance where there was none, or, as has been indicated above, no transformative learning may follow at all.

### **Criticisms of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory**

A range of criticisms have been leveled at Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning. These include the charges that his theory does not take sufficient account of the learning context (Clark & Wilson 1991), that it is beholden to the developmental myth of modernism (Pietrykowski 1996), that it is not concerned enough about social action and change (Newman 1993, Inglis 1997, Brookfield 2000), and that it neglects to situate perspective transformations within the continuum of an adult’s development (Kegan, 2000). However, it is the criticism that Mezirow’s theory places too much stress on rational processes that has the greatest relevance for this paper. Some forms of this criticism spring from a depth psychology perspective. For example, Boyd and Myers (1988) advocate a process of ‘transformative education’ that is inspired by the work of Jung, and sees transformation as a process of coming to terms with deep unconscious structures. This view understands the consciousness of the personal ego as a relatively minor part of the transformative process. Boyd and Myers (1988: 266) therefore criticise Mezirow’s theory as a form of instrumental

education that at best serves to adjust the ego to the demands of the social world. Dirkx (e.g. 2000) is another critic of Mezirow's emphasis on conscious processes in transformation, promoting the role of the imagination in adult experience generally, and transformative learning in particular.

Another line of criticism of Mezirow's rationalism, and one with particular resonance for the literacy focus of this paper, comes from the feminist standpoint of Belenky and Stanton (2000), which draws from ideas in Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1996) *Women's Ways of Knowing*. Their criticism of Mezirow's theory is based on the idea that there a number of kinds of knowledge at play in the complex process of adult learning, and that Mezirow's critical reflection is only a possible culminating form of knowing. In particular, an alternative route to transformative learning lies through what Belenky and Stanton (1988) call 'Connected Knowing', which contrasts with the 'Separate Knowing' that they say characterises Mezirow's process of critical reflection. They agree that the process of perspective transformation needs to involve 'developing and testing ideas', and acknowledge that Mezirow expounds one way to achieve this, but according to Belenky and Stanton (1988: 87),

Connected knowing provides another set of procedures for developing and testing ideas.... People who take this approach play the believing game. They look for strengths, not weaknesses in another's argument. If a weakness is perceived they struggle to understand why someone might think that way.

Of great interest in the context of this paper is Belenky and Stanton's (2000) claim that the 'doubting game' they see at the centre of Mezirow's critical approach to perspective transformation acts to block the path of marginalised people to transformative learning. They argue that 'Separate Knowing, with all of its doubting, can harm those who lack confidence in their abilities to develop and articulate ideas.' (2000: 88) Belenky and Stanton believe that learning environments can be created that foster transformative learning without subjecting learners to the potentially silencing process of criticising assumptions.

## **Transformative learning theory and adult literacy education**

Mezirow himself ventured into theorising about adult literacy education (1996). Mezirow's discussion of adult literacy proposes that literacy learning should embrace both instrumental and communicative learning domains (1996: 4). He acknowledges that there is a legitimate place in literacy programs for the acquisition of skills, but criticises government-sanctioned literacy programs for over-emphasising this instrumental aspect of literacy, which he says they do because it is relatively easy to assess this kind of learning (1996: 2). However, the development of 'communicative competence' requires learners to engage in 'rational discourse', which for Mezirow, as discussed above, means justifying reasons behind our own utterances and assessing the reasons put forward by others (1996: 5). To reach this level of communicative competence, learners need to actively engage in critical reflection. He mentions the use of both objective and subjective reframing in relation to texts in this process (1996: 4). Ideally, learners can practice their critical reflection under the 'ideal conditions of rational discourse' described above. While Mezirow believes that the ideal conditions of rational discourse are characteristic of university seminars and court rooms, he asserts that they should also belong to adult literacy programs and assessment (1996: 7). In Mezirow's view, if adult literacy programs combined both instrumental and communicative learning, and sought to replicate the ideal conditions of rational discourse, then these programs would become transformative processes (1996: 8).

Despite Mezirow calling attention to the transformative promise of literacy learning, there has been little empirical research on transformative learning in the context of adult literacy education. However, the small amount of research that has concerned itself with transformative learning in adult literacy programs indicates that adult literacy education may in fact provide extremely fertile soil for the cultivation of transformative learning. Detail can be added to this picture by extending our scope to include research into transformative learning in English as a second language (ESL) programs, as well as to research not explicitly investigating transformative learning, but concerned nonetheless with learning that goes beyond skill acquisition in adult literacy programs. This other research points to the strong transformative potential in programs concerned with developing literacy in other languages, as well as a distinct tendency for adult literacy education to foster deep personal changes in learners that fall outside the official instrumental objectives of literacy programs. In surveying this research, we will first introduce and group the studies, then look at the themes of the learners and their backgrounds, the nature of the changes experienced by learners, and the facilitators of these changes.

We will look at five studies that are situated within the transformative learning paradigm. Of these, the work of King and Wright (2003) is of greatest significance, probing the experiences of 19 participants in Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs in the United States. They sought answers to three questions: 1) Do adult learners participating in ABE programs experience perspective transformation? 2) If so, how can it be characterised?, and 3) What do learners perceive as facilitating perspective transformations? According to King and Wright (2003), 18 of the 19 subjects in their study had experienced perspective transformations in connection with participation in the program. Dillon-Black (1998) offers a sensitive case study of one adult literacy learner ('Rose') in a United States program. She sets out to measure her own practice as an adult educator against the transformative theories of Mezirow and others, and reflect on Rose's transformative learning experience. Research by Magro (2002) sought answers to two questions: 1) Do adult educators' conceptualisations of the teaching-learning process reflect the assumptions about the role of the educator and the process of learning described in transformative learning theories? And 2) Do teachers see themselves as "transformative" educators? She conducted in-depth interviews with 12 literacy educators to help answer her questions. In a related study (2004) she interviewed 10 adult literacy learners to determine their motivation for engaging in literacy education, their learning experiences and the barriers they encountered in the process. Her research took place in a Canadian literacy centre.

A study of transformative learning in second language learning programs provides insights that augment the literacy-based research. King (2000) explicitly contends that some of the results of her research into the experiences of participants in ESL programs generalise to the literacy context. Her study examined 'the educational contributors to and the nature of perspective transformation experiences' of 208 survey participants, following up the survey with 24 interviews. King (2000) describes the findings of this research as 'remarkable', pointing out that 'while previous research among adult learners in higher education demonstrated a 32.5% rate (N=422) of experiencing transformational learning in relation to their educational studies (King, 1997), this most recent research among adult learners enrolled in college ESL programs indicates a 66.8% (N=208) rate of occurrence.' When these figures are juxtaposed against the 95% rate (N=19) of perspective transformation in literacy learners reported in King and Wright's (2003) research (which used a modified version of the

assessment tool employed in King's earlier studies), an intriguing picture indeed emerges of the transformative potential of adult literacy education.

A further sample of three pieces of research that were conducted outside the transformative learning paradigm will help to enrich the discussion. These are included because they explore the personal changes experienced by learners within adult literacy programs. Malicky and Katz (1997) followed five program participants for six months to produce a detailed description of the nature of literacy learning and the factors that supported learning in a Canadian program. Bingman and Ebert (1999, 2000) were interested in how 10 adults described the impacts of their participation in adult literacy classes on their lives, and how these impacts compared with the official 'performance measures' attached to the programs. Their research took place in the context of a longitudinal study of adult literacy participants in Tennessee, USA. These three studies provide a rich source of information about the nature of personal changes in learners, and include a number of findings that readily apply to the transformative learning framework.

The learners in the literacy program-based studies were generally from disadvantaged backgrounds, but were described as competent, 'ordinary' adults. Bingman and Ebert (1999, 2000), for example, characterised the everyday life of their participants 'a mix of hard times and ordinary life issues'. They reject the discourse that positions adult literacy learners as incapable or who can be 'saved' by enrolling in basic education programs. 'Instead, people describe lives that are in most ways quite ordinary.... Their literacy skills and/or educational opportunities have been limited, but they are not people who are "other" than most Tennesseans.' In King and Wright's (2003) research, many of the participants received public assistance, and were compelled to enroll in literacy programs to remain eligible for this support. They report that most of the participants read at below 10<sup>th</sup> grade level, most were aged between 21-49 (the largest group (68%) between 30-39 years), while 21% of the participants completed high school. Malicky and Katz's (1997) subjects generally came from backgrounds characterised by poverty and abuse, while Dillon-Black's (1998) case also came from an abusive household.

Magro's (2002) subjects, who were predominantly 'new Canadians', but also included participants from isolated rural and Indigenous communities, all described experiences of trauma and disadvantage. The new Canadians, drawn mainly from war-ravaged countries

exhibited high levels of post-traumatic stress, while the Canadians from isolated communities reported lives affected by poverty, violence, fragmentation in families, health and emotional problems, personal insecurities and drug and alcohol addiction. Magro (2002: 346) identified a number of barriers that impeded progress and continuity in literacy programs including financial difficulties, problems balancing parenting and school responsibilities, anxiety, stress, and other emotional problems; too little time at home to complete assignments, and a lack of study skills. Nevertheless, in an observation echoing Bingman and Ebert's (1999, 2000) assertions about the integrity of their learners, Magro (2002: 349) described the participants as 'resilient survivors' who have returned to education 'to gain a sense of self-worth and dignity that eluded them in the past'. She concludes (2002: 350) that the participants 'have survived difficult circumstances and see a return to school as an opportunity to initiate a positive change.'

These findings tend to corroborate Mezirow's (1978) suggestion that many of the 'disorienting dilemmas' that triggered transformative learning in his research had their source in broader life issues facing learners, and indicate that the level of personal disruption found in the background of many adult literacy program participants may engender a high degree of 'readiness' for perspective transformation.

Perspective transformation refers to fundamental changes in the lives of adults. As King and Wright (2003: 102) put it, '[m]ore than a "change of mind," perspective transformations entail fundamental reframing of how individuals understand and conceptualise their worlds'. In the research surveyed in this paper there is a high level of agreement concerning the nature of the personal changes experienced by learners beyond those related to instrumental skill acquisition. In King and Wright's study (2003) 18 of the 19 participants were confirmed as having experienced transformative learning in connection with the literacy program. King and Wright (2003: 108) explain that

This change in meaning perspective, or frame of reference, centers on the themes of confidence and empowerment, socialization and support.... The participating ABE learners described a wide variety of changes that made up their experience of perspective transformation. From incrementally better understanding themselves and their world to seeing dramatic points of insight, these are personal accounts of how their frames of reference and understanding shifted to a new position and offered a

distinctly different manner and view of making sense for themselves within a greater context. In many ways, self meets society in these stories as they speak of changes within themselves and changes about how they see, interact, and understand others.

Changes in levels of empowerment and confidence were central characteristics of the transformations of participants in King and Wright's (2003) study. They report that participants 'describe how their past sense of failure was gradually replaced with self-reliance.' (2003: 108-109) King and Wright (2003: 110) note that one of the most pervasive changes connected with the theme of empowerment related to assumptions about learning. 'The learners feel they can learn, and they have confidence they can reach their goals. This is a significant shift in the frame of reference and perspective from their prior self-described notions that they would not be motivated nor could successfully participate in educational activities.' (2003: 109) Malicky and Katz (1997) and Bingman and Ebert (1999, 2000) both report similar positive changes in relation to learning. The learners in King and Wright's (2003: 111) study were also able to confidently assert themselves in social relationships and engage in community work. The learner described by Dillon-Black (1998) was empowered through her transformative learning. Rose went from being essentially mute in a job interview to going out and asking for a second interview and consequently asserting her rights in the workplace. In respect to the abuse she was experiencing at home, Dillon-Black's (1998: 4) subject related that she 'wasn't putting up with as much'.

Bingman and Ebert (1999, 2000) reported that participation in literacy education produced changes in the learners' 'sense of self', which manifested in increases in pride and accomplishment, a new sense of efficacy, and gaining 'voice'. They conclude that '[i]t appears to us that most of these people had a positive sense of self before participating in adult literacy programs. But their participation did lead to changes in what they felt able to do, or as June [one of the participants] put it, to feeling "activated."' (1999: 4) In Malicky and Katz's (1997) research, empowerment was one of the key themes to emerge. They report that '[t]he most obvious increase in power and control came in increased ability to do things.' (1997: 9) Their subjects engaged in a wide range of new activities as a result of increased self-efficacy. Another change remarked by Malicky and Katz (1997: 12), and one that was more noticeable in female participants, was 'movement from silence to speech', a theme that reflects changes reported in Dillon-Black's (1998) and Bingman and Ebert's (1999, 2000)

subjects. However, in contrast to King and Wright's (2003) findings, Malicky and Katz (1997) found that greater empowerment did not translate into greater involvement in community-based work or concern with broader social change.

King's (2000) work on transformative learning in the ESL setting revealed changes that included, not surprisingly, beliefs regarding the host culture. However, she suggests that other changes she identified may be experienced by learners in the literacy setting of ABE programs, including intercultural awareness and tolerance, perspectives on language learning and personal change.

The kinds of change facilitated by literacy programs described in these studies reflect Mezirow's understanding of the transformed adult. These learners have overcome disempowering assumptions, and like the adults researched in other transformative learning literature, embark on courses of action to cement their new perspectives. Of particular interest is the extent to which perspective changes include gaining a positive attitude toward learning itself.

The evidence of transformative learning in adults enrolled in literacy programs lead King and Wright (2003) to propose that the practice of adult literacy educators would benefit from knowledge of the theory of transformative learning. They suggest that transformative learning theory can help educators to better understand their learners and their learners' needs and potential. In her work in the context of ESL, King (2000) points out that the stages of perspective transformation provide a useful framework for understanding learner changes, and helps to redirect the focus of the program to the personal changes experienced by learners. She concludes that '[t]his perspective leads to a recommendation to introduce ESL and other ABE or literacy faculty to the theory of transformational learning and how it is manifested in the classroom.' (2000: 10)

A number of facilitators of transformative learning, encompassing the learning environment and activities and social support, were identified in the studies. To create an environment conducive to transformative learning, King and Wright (2003: 118) suggest strategies that include:

- The gradual introduction of learners to role-plays, class discussion, critical questioning, and group projects;
- Discussing, writing, or participating in role-plays about the participants' own transformational learning;
- Considering the implications of their learning for their lives through writing and discussion;
- Participation in group projects based on significant issues that involve reflecting on personal beliefs, values, and assumptions.

They also advocate the combination of group projects with reflective essays and class discussion about group experiences to facilitate 'significant learning'.

In Dillon-Black's (1998) case study, the catalytic event in Rose's transformation was an episode in the classroom initiated when she revealed to the group that she had recently attended a job interview and failed to secure the position because when asked about her strengths, she replied that she had none. Dillon-Black (1998) reports that she and the class group immediately set out to demonstrate to Rose that in the course of her normal domestic duties and family life she had developed a range of important skills. When they listed Rose's strengths on the board, she exclaimed that 'I just never thought of it that way.' (Dillon-Black 1998: 4) This activity led to Rose's empowerment as demonstrated in securing employment and asserting herself in workplace and home situations.

Magro's (2004: 3) research found that adult literacy educators resorted to many different forms of literature as a way to explore issues such as racism and the environment. They also discovered that autobiography and creative writing were effective methods to mobilise imagination and engage learners. Magro (2004: 3) adds that '[t]he importance of "value-laden course content" was seen by many of the teachers in this study as being an important vehicle for promoting critical awareness and deeper level learning.'

Malicky and Katz (1997: 13) suggest that 'critical literacy needs to begin with people's stories', and that this can be achieved by giving program participants opportunities to write about their themselves and their lives, and using dialogue to 'develop critical consciousness of contradictions in the lives of low-literate adults and in the larger society. Through talking,

reading and writing, people come to understand that their issues are not unique, that they can get support from each other in addressing these issues, and possibly, that they can start to seek solutions and take action.’ Malicky and Katz (1997) also cite the importance of learners having an experience of alternative power arrangements within the literacy program. They say that ‘[w]hile not changing the larger system, this does provide one context in which individuals experience equality, ownership and empowerment. By living out what might be within the literacy program, they become aware of the possibilities for a more equitable and democratic society.’ (1997: 13)

The importance of support from both others learners and educators was a consistent theme in these studies. In all of the research surveyed in this paper, personal change is facilitated and supported through relationships characterised by genuineness and trust. King and Wright (2003: 112) concluded that transformative learning took place ‘with and because of community support’. They claimed a ‘critical place’ for dialogue, engagement, and support in transformational learning. (2003: 113) King (2000: 8) reported that her respondents in the ESL context ‘especially remark about family, teachers and friends supporting them through perspective transformations.’ The case of ‘Rose’ in Dillon-Black’s (1998) also placed the relations between the educator and learner, and those of the class members and the learner in a central position. Rose’s transformation was a function of the unconditional support she received from the educator and the group. Magro’s (2002) educators actively created ‘an atmosphere of trust and respect’ so that meaningful learning could take place, while in her later study (2004: 350) she concluded that ‘[a]n educational climate and innovative curricula that emphasise “connection and meaning” are central to fostering “deeper level” of transformative types of learning’. Bingman and Ebert’s (1999, 2000) research also acknowledges the importance of social support in the personal changes they studied. Finally, Malicky and Katz’s (1997) study gives a significant role to social networks in the changes undergone by their subjects. While their report does not explicitly draw on the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1996), the language of their conclusions lends itself to comparison with Belenky and Stanton’s (2002) formulations. Malicky and Katz (1997: 12) report that although social networks were important for the learning of all their subjects, the men and women in their research placed different values on the significance of social support, and that networks had different functions in each case. ‘For the women’, they say, ‘social networks inside the program had to do with safety and identity.’ The men saw social networks as having somewhat less significance in their learning. Malicky and Katz

(1997: 12) offer the provocative suggestion that this finding ‘may reflect a basic difference between men and women in their ways of knowing. Women tend to perceive themselves in terms of connections and relationships to others whereas men tend to see themselves more in terms of separation and autonomy.’

The central role of social relationships in the facilitation of personal transformation as found in these studies has important implications for the debate surrounding the role of critical rationality in transformative learning. Mezirow (1996) believed that critical reflection on assumptions, ideally undertaken in the context of rational discourse, was the key to a transformative approach to literacy education. Belenky and Stanton (2000), on the other hand, contend that transformative learning does not necessarily involve the exercise of critical reflection, which they characterise as ‘Separate Knowing’, a kind of knowing they say is based on playing the ‘doubting game’. Perspective transformation can also come about, in Belenky and Stanton’s (2000) view, through engaging in ‘Connected Knowing’ which is based on the principle of the ‘believing game’. It is probably safe to say that the ‘believing game’ has taken precedence over the ‘doubting game’ in the experiences of the learners in these studies, although critical reflection on assumptions has also been cited in these accounts, which allows us to tentatively conclude that perspective transformation, at least in the literacy setting, need not take place exclusively through critical reflection, but can also be realised through ‘Connected Knowing’.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the transformative potential of adult literacy learning. Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning was introduced. His theory describes and analyses fundamental changes or ‘perspective transformations’ in the lives of adults. It was noted that a range of events can trigger the ‘disorienting dilemmas’ that initiate the process of perspective transformation, and that participation in learning can facilitate the process. Mezirow believes that critical assessment of assumptions is an essential part of transformative learning, although dissenting views were considered. Adult literacy learning was investigated as a setting for transformative learning. Research is not extensive in the area, but studies that have been conducted indicate that adult literacy programs have significant potential for promoting perspective transformation. Learners entering these programs often possess backgrounds marked by disadvantage or trauma, conditions that bring adults to the threshold of transformative learning. The changes described by the research

cluster around the theme of empowerment, which related to personal achievement in learning as well as the social world. Learning methods that promote reflection on personal beliefs, values and assumptions, as well as on larger societal issues are often employed in literacy programs, but the research pointed consistently to the significant role of highly supportive relationships in personal change, lending weight to Belenky and Stanton's (2000) argument that 'Connected Knowing' may be an alternative route to transformative learning, and one that may be more appropriate than critical reflection for less confident communicators.

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