Chapter 2.1
Spiraling into Transformative Learning

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how technical and vocational learning may spiral into transformative learning. Transformative learning theory is reviewed and the learning tasks of critical theory are used to integrate various approaches to transformative learning. With this as a foundation, the article explores how transformative learning can be fostered in adult vocational education

INTRODUCTION

In the adult education literature, we tend to separate different kinds of learning into categories, with transformative learning falling into a separate category—one which seems to be more important than the others. Mezirow (2000) describes four types of learning: the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, the elaboration on existing knowledge and skills, the revision of a meaning scheme, and the revision of a perspective. Only the latter two, he states, are transformative. This has the unfortunate tendency to disconnect vocational education, training, workplace learning, and the like from mainstream adult education and thereby to overlook the possibility of transformative learning occurring in educational forums that we consider to be more technical.

Let us consider some ordinary examples from everyday life. Even though my mother died many years ago, I still sometimes think of the constraints in her life from not acquiring the common skill of driving a car. She immigrated to Canada from Amsterdam following Word War II as one of many "war brides" (those young women who married the soldiers whom they met during the war) and she settled with my father in a rural, isolated area of Western Canada. Going from a

large family in Amsterdam to a rather desolate area of the prairies was difficult enough, but my mother could not drive a car. The nearest neighbors were at least two miles away from our farm, and long walks on dusty roads were not something that appealed to my mother. She could not go to town, 25 miles away, nor could she visit anyone in the community unless they came to her. She insisted that it was impossible for her to learn to drive a car. The process frightened her; she didn't understand or like machinery. And that was that for the next thirty or so years that she lived. No one challenged her or tried to provide the support that might have led her to acquire this skill. My father worked long hours on the farm. The other women in the community worked alongside their husbands on the farms (my mother did not). Is it not possible, or even likely, that learning to drive a car, a technical skill, would have spiraled into transformative learning for her?

I grew up in a time and place where gender roles were fairly rigidly defined. Although the farm women helped with the farm work, the men took care of finances, fixed things, and were responsible for the machinery and the "heavy work." Women took care of things inside the house, including canning and preserving food for the winter. I uncritically absorbed these gender roles. When I first lived alone, I had no idea of how to do the "male jobs" in life. I was frightened and embarrassed to admit that I did not have the basic skills that everyone around me took for granted. Opening a bank account, getting a credit card, using a lawn mower, hammering a nail into something—these were all challenging experiences. When I began to acquire these basic technical skills for everyday life, I came to see myself in a new light and to feel a profound sense of accomplishment that went far beyond the actual task.

To go back to an education context, for many years I taught a course called "Methods and Strategies in Adult Education" to primarily tradespeople who were preparing to become teachers of their trades in a community college. They tended to be anxious about returning to school, concerned about their ability to engage in learning, and worried about appearing to be foolish in front of their peers. I have told many stories about working with the people in this program, but in this context, one particular anecdote comes to mind. The group had decided that they wanted to learn how to prepare PowerPoint presentations. We booked a computer lab, I invited a technical person to attend the session to help out, and two of the participants in the group who already knew how to use PowerPoint offered to lead the class. Most people were nervous, but one man (I will call him Jim) was especially resistant. He would never need or use this skill, he said. He thought he would skip the session and do something else. I suggested he come to the lab for a little while, and if it really appeared to be irrelevant, he could leave. I did not witness the moment when things changed for Jim, but at one point I noticed that he had moved from looking over someone's shoulder to sitting at a computer. Apparently, he had asked the technical assistant to show him how to turn on the computer, and he was following the instructions for creating a slide. Later that day, when we were back in our classroom, Jim announced to the group, "Now, I'm a real teacher! I can make slides!" Again, although this appears to be a simple technical skill, it spiraled into a potentially transformative experience for Jim; this was the first time he thought of himself as a teacher.

It is my intent in this article to demonstrate how technical and vocational learning has the possibility of spiraling into transformative learning. First, I provide a brief overview of transformative learning theory. I discuss the fragmentation of transformative learning theory. I then go on to use the learning tasks of critical theory as a framework to integrate the fragments of transformative learning theory. With this in mind, I return to adult vocational education and technology to see how we can engage in the learning tasks of

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