

## Chapter 2

# Transformative Learning and Ancient Asian Educational Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*Scholars and practitioners all seem to agree that andragogy is not the only perspective and model in the field of adult learning. We no longer think of learning as democratic styles and methods versus authoritarian styles and methods. Rather, we now think of learning as a reflective process where learners may engage their whole body and mind in a critical manner. Worldwide, there are many rich traditions that we can contrast the theory of transformative learning with to improve our understanding, appreciation, application, and further research of this theory to practice. This chapter explores the connections of Ancient Asian educational perspectives with transformative learning for these purposes.*

### INTRODUCTION

Learning is a transformative process that leads to changes in behavior, attitudes, and thinking. From many perspectives, to learn without critical reflection is labor lost. Confucius advanced this concept 2,500 years ago. Contrast contemporary Chinese and Indian scholars' emphasis on inner experience as a prerequisite for meaning-making with Western education's prescribed, standard-based content and struggle to foster critical, reflective thinking, and it is easy to see how the

Eastern educational perspectives provide a rich foundation for transformative learning.

Although we know that children and adults learn differently, we also know people from different social contexts engage in and respond to learning differently. In other words, learning is pursued differently from age to age, and culture to culture. To view learning simply in terms of behavioral changes is too narrow a lens (Wang & King, 2007). To view learning simply in terms of achieving autonomy in thinking or data outcomes is likewise too narrow. Furthermore, we need to consider that viewing learning in terms of solving real life problems is considered utilitarianism.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-745-9.ch002

Learning instead can have a much broader scope when we are freed from current cultural and sociopolitical trappings. To be exact, learning as the cultivation of one's inner experience(s) has a sacred purpose, that is, to aid one to become a sage, a genuine person so that the genuine person should be free from four things: arbitrariness of opinion, dogmatism, obstinacy, and egotism (as cited in Wang & King, 2006, p. 4).

In the ancient Indian culture, learning is perceived as encompassing intellectual cognitive abilities but extending it to include the development of intuition, aesthetics, and a futuristic and ecological perspective based on universal outlook (Chand, 2004). It is hard to say whether ancient Chinese influenced ancient Indians or vice versa. History records that one Chinese emperor in the Tang dynasty did send a Chinese monk to India to study Buddhism and spread this religion in China. After the Song dynasty, Chinese scholars developed Neo-Confucianism, which seemed drastically different from Indian view on reflective learning (Zhou, 2003).

Although both systems recognize the function of mind and consciousness, the Chinese system further acknowledges the higher level of reason. Without making reference to the oldest existing systems of learning, contemporary Western scholars advanced a vibrant theory of learning, transformative learning, which also makes use of one's experiences. These scholars define the process of transformative learning as roughly making sense of one's experiences. Understandably then, a better understanding of the various learning theories will result in better decisions regarding learning experiences and more desirable outcomes (Wang, 2006).

Although the processes of learning are universal, an attempt to discern the theory of transformative learning from ancient Asian educational perspectives is not without insightful guidance in our quest for truth. With this intention, the authors of the chapter bring together prominent Ancient Asian learning perspectives and theories to give

readers a sense of how to appreciate and apply transformative learning from these international roots so that together we can bring transformative learning to life with greater depth in our respective fields.

Both India and China boast thousands of years of history in learning (Chand, 2004; Zhou, 2003). Their learning systems developed as early as the scribes first appeared in Egypt. Therefore, examining the literature of the learning systems in India and China and contrasting it with Western transformative learning may help guide our application of the prevalent theory of transformative learning to practice. Furthermore, Miles and Huberman (1994) defined the intent of the literature review as an investigative process where researchers gradually made sense of a social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloguing, and classifying the object of study. This approach is the very method we used to review related literature to arrive at the following analysis for your appreciation and critique.

## **2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Schutz (1967) argues, "I live in my Acts and by reflecting upon them" (p. 51). Once we do this, we begin the process of meaning-making in our lives. Jarvis (2001) claims that "throughout our lives, many of the experiences are encountered, incorporated into our biographies" (p. 49). Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) produced a model of the process of meaning-making (see Figure 1), which leads to new perspectives on experience. The basis for meaning-making or transformative learning is one's experience. Without the experience, we build temporal constructions like sandcastles. Such constructions, however elegant, are drastically subject to the next wind of change. It is very consistent with what Rousseau profoundly believed: Experience is the best teacher, and everything possible should be taught by actions (Bott, Slapar, & Wang, 2003, p. 32).

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