



Transformational Learning and Teacher Collaborative Communities

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ABSTRACT

An abundance of literature on transformational learning and teacher professional learning communities (PLCs) exists; yet, few, in any, have linked the presence of one within the other. We believe Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory should be acknowledged as a viable theoretical framework for better understanding the power of how teachers work together. Evidence of its presence can be identified within the current school practices of PLCs and other collaborative activities. In this paper, we will first overview Mezirow's theories of transformational learning and then attempt to show how the work of professional learning communities specifically and teacher collaboration generally provide a platform for transforming teachers' understandings of pedagogy and their roles as teachers. After outlining the concept of transformational learning, we provide two specific research examples to support the existence and relational significance of Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory as it relates to advancing teacher practice through collaboration. We trust that our paper adds to a better understanding of why teachers believe collaboration with their peers represents their best professional learning.

Learning is about transformation, it's about change, it's about seeing yourself in relation to the world differently.

J. Apte (2009)

Theories about child development have a long history in education and include the works of Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey. However, few educators before Jack Mezirow had explored how adults make meaning of their lives and learning. While doing a study on women returning to school as adults, Mezirow theorised much of what we have now come to call 'Transformational Learning Theory'. In this paper, we will review Mezirow's work and link Transformational Learning Theory to research on the improvement of teacher practice through collaboration.

Mezirow (2000) believed transformational learning was a process of 'perspective transformation' with three dimensions: (1) changes in understanding of self; (2) revision of belief systems; and, (3) changes in

lifestyle. 'In the absence of fixed truths and confronted with often rapid change in circumstances, we cannot fully trust what we know or believe' (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 3-4). Transformational learning about teaching occurs when teachers critically examine their practice and develop alternative perspectives of understanding that practice – an activity common in our current era of curricular reform that encourages teachers to question their understanding and beliefs regarding teaching and learning. Guerra and Nelson (2009) acknowledge the common misconception of leaders who assume that changing practice and belief are similar.

Mezirow (1997) believes transformations come about in one of four ways: (1) elaborating existing frames of reference; (2) learning new frames of reference; (3) transforming points of view; and, (4) transforming habits of the mind. Many schools, intentionally or not, have implemented transformational learning among their staff by engaging teacher collaboration (sometimes called professional learning communities [PLCs]). Although many teachers view their collaboration with other teachers as a means to improve student achievement, we believe it is important to consider the transformational learning that occurs within teacher collaboration. Recent research in Alberta (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012) found that teachers in ten schools and five school divisions believed collaboration with other teachers was the best professional learning they had ever engaged in.

Transformational learning has been described as the process of making meaning of one's experiences. Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory (1991) suggests that adults' assumptions and expectations can be changed only after critical reflection and dialogue with those who can shed light on those preconceptions. Because such critical reflection and dialogue can be personal and important, it is safe to assume that conflict might arise when colleagues engage critically. We see such conflict as unavoidable and healthy. Servage (2007) recommended that one anticipate and build skills to work through conflict so that, when teachers collaborate, conflict can be directed to achieve positive ends and stimulate teachers to increase their knowledge and skills. Rather than trying to eliminate conflict, a leadership goal should be to use conflict to transform pedagogical practice.

As teachers transform their understanding of pedagogy and their roles as teachers, they 'become more open to alternatives, as [they] root out the habits of mind [they] have acquired in the past' (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004, p. 292). For teachers, transformation evolves by discovering new knowledge, creatively using that knowledge, and self-confidently facilitating action by taking responsibility for what one learns. Because teaching always involves action, learning can become a virtual stream of discovery – a transformational process of lasting and positive change. As Mezirow (1997) implicitly predicted when he defined the potential for professional growth within teacher collaboration as *communicative learning*, we are finding that transformation seldom occurs in isolation (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012).

Mezirow (1997) believes communicative learning involves understanding purposes, values, beliefs, and feeling and is less amenable to empirical tests. 'In communicative learning it becomes essential for learners to become critically reflective of the assumptions underlying intentions, values, beliefs, and feelings' (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). Teacher collaboration offers opportunities for teachers to critically examine evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view. These

conversations encourage self-reflection and lead to personal transformations in teachers' beliefs, values, and practices related to teaching and learning (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012). Transformational learning is a process, not a recipe.

Mezirow outlined a number of phases involved in a transformational learning process (Mezirow, 1978). Broadly, these phases describe people engaged in activities that might lead them to shift meaning perspectives. The phases include sorting through the effects of shifting processes, grappling with new learning pressures, and engaging with others to integrate new meanings within existing perspectives. Although much teacher learning happens within a community, teachers enact these phases individually and in different orders. The phases can be cyclical or recursive and learners may start anywhere, without including all the steps. Passing through these phases, similar to any learning, might happen un-noticed by the learner. One simply learns.

Mezirow's (2000) phases include: engaging disorienting dilemmas; self-examining feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame; critically assessing assumptions; recognising that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared; exploring options for new roles, relationships, and actions; planning a course of action; acquiring knowledge and skills to implement one's plan; provisionally trying new roles; building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and, reintegrating one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives.

Two important considerations when processing through Mezirow's phases are the speed and influence of the discoveries (Kroth & Boverie, 2009). Being autonomous thinkers, this process of discovery ranges from evolutionary to revolutionary depending upon one's past experiences, current beliefs, values, and feelings. Although teachers 'learn together by analysing the related experiences of others to arrive at a common understanding that holds until new evidence or arguments present themselves' (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7), those who study teacher collaboration cannot fail to recognise that transformational learning will be both corporate and individual.

The organisation of teachers into groups of collaborative learners fosters a supportive environment with the potential to nurture adult learning (DuFour, 2006; Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011). According to Mezirow (1997), disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and rational discourse are keys to bringing about transformational learning. Mezirow asserts that applying or experiencing one, all, or a combination of these elements may lead to transformational learning. Mezirow also believes humans will not make transformational changes if new material fits too comfortably into existing frames of reference.

Becoming an active teacher collaborator helps teachers in identifying dilemmas, critical reflection, and rational discourse. Although literature excludes the positive role that conflict has within transformational learning and teacher collaboration, it should be considered an effective characteristic of a professional learning community. Conflict allows teachers to extend beyond existing frames of reference and creates a potential for transformational learning to occur. As educational researchers become aware of the value transformational learning has within teacher professional learning, we believe their work will become more reflective of the process. Today, Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory is often only implicit within educational research findings. Our hope is to move these implicit foundations closer to the

surface, thus linking new research on teacher professional learning and older theories about adult transformational learning theory.

Using Transformational Learning Theory as a theoretical framework, teachers who read research literature can make logical sense of the relationships of variables and factors relevant to their work. In terms of pedagogical beliefs and values, Transformational Learning Theory allows teachers to answer questions such as: What requirements are needed to increase teacher professional learning? What roles should leaders assume if their aim is to promote collective pedagogical change? How should leaders facilitate teacher collaboration to engage conflict in positive ways? What specific roles should teachers assume? How might transformation differ among individual teachers? What are the best ways (and for what purposes) to utilise teacher collaboration?

Although the term Transformational Learning Theory is absent in many educational research studies, as we noted earlier, we believe there is ample evidence that the process of transformational learning is present. Below we outline two extant research studies that support our point.

In the first study, Perry Graham (2007) conducted a case study examining the relationship between teacher improvement and professional learning communities (PLCs) within a middle school. Ultimately, Graham was attempting to identify how PLCs might encourage transformational learning among teachers. He suggested that PLCs are a process of communicative learning and provide opportunities for educators to evaluate their assumptions and expectations through critical reflections and discourse with colleagues. Graham (2007) acknowledged key characteristics of transformational learning within PLCs and advised school leaders to 'address teacher improvement tangentially, encouraging actions such as teacher collaboration, dialogue, and reflection' (p. 2).

Graham, using personal interviews, found that the transformation of teacher professional learning varied between participants. His finding coincides with Mezirow's theory that the process of discovery and transformation will range individually depending upon experience, beliefs, values, and feelings. Graham's study confirmed that teachers hold a set of assumptions and expectations that change only after critical reflection and dialogue. One participant highlighted the power of dialogue by stating, 'When you're only looking at it from your own perspective, you can't see that it might be you' (Graham, 2007, p. 8). The study concludes by stating that the primary strength of teacher collaboration is the way it opens opportunities for teachers to learn from others.

In a second research study, Karl Attard (2012) explored how structured learning communities can promote reflective awareness and professional learning through collaborative examinations of professional experience. Attard highlighted four main themes present throughout this study: (1) reflective writing; (2) collaborative reflection; (3) appreciating the individual; and, (4) teacher learning. Each theme is representative of Mezirow's transformational learning. By elaborating existing frames of references, learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view, and transforming habits of mind, transformations occur (Mezirow, 1997).

Throughout his study, Attard used reflective journals as the primary data source to document participants' transformational learning. Attard's research

supports Mezirow's (2000) belief that 'we live in the absence of fixed truths ... and we cannot fully trust what we know or believe' (p. 3). Throughout this study, participants commented how reflections triggered new questions that needed to be answered, while acknowledging that sharing reflections with other members strengthened and validated the reflective process (Attard, 2012, p. 203). Given the risk involved in sharing reflections and engaging in discourse, it seems intuitive that a climate of trust is a prerequisite for collaborative learning. Trust was the bridge that allowed teachers to open lines of communication; and, a starting point in Attard's study was that teachers were not assigned to a learning community but chose to participate. The study's professional learning design promoted a collaborative process where new information was input by each member and analysed collectively: 'Knowledge was being constructed to promote professional learning and improvement of practice' (Attard, 2012, p. 203). Participants acknowledged that teacher collaboration supported planning a course of action and as a means of acquiring knowledge and skills while building competence and self-confidence. Mezirow (1997) identifies each of these activities as phases within transformational learning.

These research examples support the relational relevance of Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory as it relates to improving teacher practice through collaboration. Although the two researchers reviewed do not explicitly connect their work to Mezirow's theory, we find it impossible to deny that these findings emphasise the kind of transformational learning Mezirow highlights: 'Learning is a social process and discourse becomes central to making meaning' (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). Dialogue during teacher collaboration facilitates transformational learning that is both corporate and individual. We believe that, as researchers continue to study teacher professional learning in terms of values, beliefs, and feelings related to teaching and learning, Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory should be acknowledged as a viable framework.

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