# ACTION IS DEMONSTATIVE OF CRITAL REFLECTION AND "DISORIENTING DILEMMA" IS DEMODE

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## Abstract

This paper explores transformative learning and 1) roles of decision making and actions as outward expressions of critical reflection and 2) vocabulary that encapsulates the essence of the "disorienting dilemma."

Keywords: Transformative learning, critical reflection, disorienting dilemma, pivotal experiences

Transformative Learning Theory embodies a process of making meaning from one's experiences and questioning existing assumptions based on prior experiences. One expects similar outcomes based on their past experiences, and it is those expectations that are called into question during transformative learning. Initially, Mezirow (1978) described a 10-phase process for personal perspective transformation, labeling it "a structural reorganization" (p. 162) in the way that the person views her/himself and her/his relationships. Researchers since Mezirow have placed emphasis on individuals encountering disorienting dilemmas and critically questioning or responding to the habitual expectations that made the event disorienting for them. Critical reflection in response to the disorienting dilemma results in reframing of beliefs/assumptions, which then permits the learner to reenter the world making sense of their experiences within transformed schema (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Dirkx (2012) described transformative learning as not only a change in what one knows or what one is able to do, but also as "a dramatic shift in *how* we come to know and how we understand ourselves in relation to the broader world" (p. 116).

This current paper seeks to explore transformative learning and 1) the roles of decision making and outcome actions as outward expressions of critical reflection and 2) the expansion of what constitutes a disorienting dilemma, if not in thought, at least in vocabulary.

## Current Criticisms of Transformative Learning Theory

Although transformative learning currently dominates adult learning research, it is not without criticism. Many adult learning theorists have called for greater theoretical precision in its conceptualizations (Baldwin, 2019). Cranton (2016) simply wrote, "…those interested in transformative learning, struggle to define the boundaries and the scope of their discipline" (p. 1). Some lack of clarity comes from theorists situating their work in transformative learning, based on derivatives of other developmental theories including, but not limited to Bruner (1966), Jung (1968), and Erikson (1959). Furthermore, Transformative Learning Theory shares many of Dewey's (1938) concepts proposed in Experiential Learning Theory. Baldwin (2019) summarized the major critiques and the authoring critics, including:

> … (a) limited exploration of theoretical conceptualizations other than Mezirow's model (Taylor & Snyder, 2012), (b) failure to differentiate metatheoretical models form [sic]

narrower specific theory (Hoggan, 2016), (c) inadequate critique of empirical studies (Taylor & Snyder, 2012), (d) lack of connection with models of general learning (Illeris, 2017b), and (e) theorizing learning as a single object (Fenwick, 2010, p. 1).

Newman (2012) posited additional critiques; for example, he questioned the veracity of transformative learning, stating that the label is widely applied to all types of learning. He suggested that transformative learning may not be a type of learning but rather a different degree of learning. Other theorists concur that it is unclear *what* is being transformed and furthermore, that the *what* changes regarding the interpretive framework through which learning is being viewed.

### Expanding Theoretical Acceptance of What Constitutes Critical Reflection

In addition to critiquing the entirety of the theory, some theorists have challenged certain tenets of the theory. Cranton (2016) challenged Transformative Learning Theory's cornerstone of critical reflection, by stating that theorists be "open to processes other than critical self-reflection as central to transformation..." (p. 6). Citing Kolb (2015) and MacKeracher (2012), Cranton further questioned their conceptions that reflection outside of self is necessary in order to learn. She stated that learning may be driven by "critical self-reflection, exploration, and intuition with no further reference to the world outside of the self" (p. 7). Dirkx (2000) wrote that transformation can take place in unconscious images and in soulwork, further suggesting that outward reflection need not be present for transformative learning to take place.

Mezirow's 2012 work suggested that the ultimate result of transformative learning should be action. As transformative theorists, we accept that the outcome action of transformative learning can be either epochal or incremental – suggesting that changes in habits of mind and outward behaviors may present immediately or gradually over time. Although theoretically epochal change is accepted, there is a dearth in the literature examining where critical reflection takes place in that type of immediate change. It seems that most extant literature implies that the critical reflection occurs simultaneously and then for some time after the event, even though the behavioral change immediate. We posit another idea: critical reflection may take place prior to the disorienting dilemma, so when the pivotal experience occurs, neurologically, the learner is ready to make change and the resulting transformative learning appears epochal. For learners who have not been critically reflecting on that portion of their beliefs/experiences, when the pivotal event takes place, they *then* begin to evaluate their existing schema, and as they work to accommodate the new experience/information, then their resulting action or behavioral change presents as incremental change.

To illustrate these suppositions, consider the following cases describing Tasha. Tasha is a single working mother who is pleased to have gainful employment that easily provides for her child and for herself. One afternoon, Tasha's colleague mentions that a new position has opened, which pays more but is in a different department, and the colleague knows that Tasha is a good fit for this position.

Case 1: Tasha genuinely appreciates her work colleagues and her boss in her current department who are supportive of a healthy work-life balance. She has not previously considered the need for a change in position, as her current position and experiences have suited her needs. In this case, Tasha may choose to explore what the other position entails and may seek information and insight regarding the new department and its employees. She may ask to speak with the supervising boss in that department to get a feel for its policies and whether work-life balance is also valued in that department.

Tasha has not previously critically reflected on her experiences/schema regarding her employment situation. In essence, her beliefs are serving her well, and if she were to choose to make a change in her employment which might require a change in her work-life balance behaviors, it would require critical reflection following the pivotal event of the colleague suggesting she could change positions to make more money.

Case 2: Although Tasha makes a nice salary, she finds her colleagues and boss put off by her occasional need to attend a school conference or event for her daughter. She frequently chooses to take work home on weekends in order to finish projects and to be sure that her colleagues know she is dedicated to work. Tasha repeatedly wonders if other employment might be better for her and her daughter, even if it meant taking a reduction to her salary.

Consequently, Tasha is already engaging in critical reflection regarding her current beliefs concerning her career experiences and work-life balance, and further, is neurologically primed for transformative learning due to her ongoing critical reflection that her current course is not best serving her needs. So, when her colleague suggests she look into another position, Tasha is ready to take the chance immediately, which presents outwardly as epochal change. The pivotal event is merely the impetus for change and not an impetus for critical reflection.

## Refining Vocabulary to Clarify Theory

The second space where we aim to clarify theory is directly related to the term "disorienting dilemma." In virtually all explanations of this tenet Transformative Learning Theory, the examples provided include negative, traumatic events, such as divorce, loss, death, war, terrorism, and/or failure. Cranton (2016) is one of the few theorists who wrote about a disorienting dilemma taking the form of a positive experience: "…A deeply felt, positive experience or series of positive experiences that lead to a question of either personal habit of mind or perspectives on the world…" (p. 56).

The theoretical intention of the term is to suggest that the learner's current schema, habits of mind, points of view, or long-held beliefs are challenged by an experience that is outside of their normal, accepted beliefs or experiences and that the mind is stressed by the difference. This concept is similar to Piaget's theory of cognitive development where he describes assimilating or accommodating new experiences and information. Assimilation is practiced when the experience is in-line with previous expectations, and the new experience is "filed" in an existing mental schema. Accommodation is required when a new experience cannot be "filed" in an existing schema, and the brain must create a new schema to house the experience/information. The "disorienting dilemma" forces the mind into accommodation of the new experiences, rather than assimilating the event into the current habits of mind.

Our argument aims to suggest a change in terminology, but our proposal for suggesting a shift to alternate vocabulary is not original. Other theorists have utilized different vocabulary to describe the "disorienting dilemma" event. For example, Taylor (2000) penned "trigger events." Cranton (2016) used "traumatic event," "positive experience," and "disturbing experience" (p. 56) and eventually titled a section in her text "Disorienting Event" (p. 48). Even Mezirow (2000) utilized the term "dramatic event." There are other possibilities, such as profound experience, critical event, crucial episode, or deep incident. However, these alternative terms have not yet been normalized within the Transformative Learning literature.

When challenging the use of terminology, it seems imperative to have simple definitions available from which to begin the dialogue. Table 1 defines the original terms, each followed by potential replacements listed in alphabetical order. The definitions were gathered from Merriam-Webster.com (accessed 04.02.2021) and will be used as points of reference for the argument.

*Table 1: Definitions of terms*

| Terms | Definitions |
| --- | --- |
| **<u>Disorienting</u>** | **1a:** to cause to lose bearings**:** displace from normal position or relationship<br>**b:** to cause to lose the sense of time, place, or identity<br>**2:** CONFUSE |
| Crucial | **1a:** IMPORTANT, SIGNIFICANT<br>**b:** important or essential as resolving a crisis<br>**c:** marked by final determination of a doubtful issue |
| Deep | **3a:** difficult to penetrate or comprehend<br>**b:** MYSTERIOUS, OBSCURE<br>**c:** grave or <u>lamentable</u> in nature or effect<br>**d:** of <u>penetrating</u> intellect<br>**e:** intensely engrossed or immersed<br>**f:** characterized by <u>profundity</u> of feeling or quality<br>**5c:** being below the level of consciousness |
| Disturbing | causing feelings of worry, concern, or anxiety |
| Dramatic | **a:** suitable to or characteristic of the drama<br>**b:** striking in appearance or effect |
| Pivotal | **1:** of, relating to, or constituting a <u>pivot</u><br>**2:** vitally important**:** CRITICAL |
| Transformative | causing or able to cause an important and lasting change in someone or something |
| Traumatic | psychologically or emotionally stressful in a way that can lead to serious mental and emotional problems |
| **<u>Dilemma</u>** | **1a:** a usually <u>undesirable</u> or unpleasant choice<br>**b:** a situation involving such a choice**:** PREDICAMENT<br>**2a:** a problem involving a difficult choice<br>**b:** a difficult or <u>persistent</u> problem<br>**3:** an argument presenting two or more equally <u>conclusive</u> alternatives against an opponent |
| Episode | **1:** a usually brief unit of action in a dramatic or literary work:<br>**b:** a developed situation that is integral to but separable from a continuous narrative**:** INCIDENT<br>**c:** one of a series of loosely connected stories or scenes<br>**2:** an event that is distinctive and separate although part of a larger series |
| Event | **1a:** something that happens**:** OCCURRENCE<br>**b:** a noteworthy happening<br>**c:** a social occasion or activity<br>**d:** an adverse or damaging medical occurrence<br>**3a:** a postulated outcome, condition, or <u>eventuality</u> |
| Experience | **1a:** direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge<br>**b:** the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation |

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| | **2a:** practical knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity<br>**b:** the length of such participation has 10 years' *experience* in the job<br>**3:** something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through<br>**4a:** the conscious events that make up an individual life<br>**b:** the events that make up the conscious past of a community or nation or humankind generally<br>**5:** the act or process of directly perceiving events or reality |
| Incident | **1a:** an occurrence of an action or situation that is a separate unit of experience**: HAPPENING**<br>**b:** an accompanying minor occurrence or condition**: CONCOMITANT**<br>**2:** an action likely to lead to grave consequences<br>**3:** something dependent on or subordinate to something else of greater or principal importance |

## Renaming Disorienting Dilemma

The use of "disorienting" may continue to fit the nature of the theoretical tenet, as it implies displacement from the normal, which accurately describes the cognitive dissonance that results from the experience that causes the learner to examine their normal beliefs. The term "disorienting", however, possesses a negative connotation. In our view and through reflecting on the nature of learning and development, avoidance of the implication of negativity seems in the best interest of the theory. The same negative connotation follows the terms "disturbing" and "traumatic;" and therefore, we recommend against the use of those terms. "Dramatic" encapsulates the gravity of the experience, but some experiences may be subtle, which then are not accurately described by the term. "Pivotal" is an interesting notion, as it is defined as "vitally important" or "of, relating to, or constituting a pivot." Of course, a pivot is a change in direction, which seems to better fit the theoretical construct of transformation and change in thought/action/behavior. Transformative is a likely candidate, as the heart of its meaning is to spur lasting change; however, maybe its use is too obvious or would become too associated or confused with the title of the learning theory.

We earnestly challenge the use of "dilemma." Extant theory suggests that experiences that challenge learners are not always negative, as the term "dilemma" implies. Furthermore, per the definition of the word, it suggests a problem involving a difficult choice. We further contend that transformative learning is not a problem, nor does it always indicate a difficult choice. The term "dilemma" does not accurately capture the nature of meaning in this theoretical tenet. Perhaps use of Cranton's "disorienting event" (2016, p. 48) or Olszewski's "pivotal experience" (2019, p. 159) is a more accurate depiction of the theoretical tenet. Either of these alternative terms capture the essence of the moment that acted as the impetus for learning.

## Conclusion

In reflection on the various authors and researchers who have both critiqued and extended understandings of transformative learning, we sought to further explore these arguments yet also, offer a different view on outward expressions of critical reflection about experiences that are deemed transformative. Specifically, we presented evidence aimed at deepening understandings of decisions and actions as demonstrative of critical reflection while

proposing new vocabulary for describing the key element, the disorienting dilemma. Through this discussion of our suppositions concerning the decisions and actions taken, we contribute to clarification and theoretical expansion and to further define the frontiers of Transformative Learning Theory.

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