

## **Theory-to-Practice**

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# ***Social Change Movements and Transformative Learning***

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### **Introduction**

Mezirow's (1991) 10 phases of perspective transformation begin with a disorienting dilemma and then move through stages which include emotional release, sharing with others, critical reflection, and, finally, action. Educators have had difficulty situating Mezirow's transformative learning theory into traditional educational settings because, among other things, the traditional learning environment is unsuitable for the range of emotions experienced by people in crisis. The classroom is a venue for critical thinking and reflection, not for expressions of anger, grief, and fear. Social change organizations, on the other hand, have no comparable limitations. Furthermore, if their vision is truly emancipatory, these organizations are particularly well suited for the practice of the liberatory learning which Mezirow's writings attempt to promote.

Social movements are repositories for people's dreams. These may be dreams of a peaceful world, of a just society, of neighborhoods where people live without fear, or of homes where love is abundant. By articulating a collective vision of a better future and channeling energies into an agenda for social action, organizations carry out their missions of social change. The advantage of sharing a dream with others is that, even when some individuals temporarily lose sight of the collective goal, there are always others who are able to keep their "eyes on the prize." However, the grander the vision, the greater the potential for failure and frustration, or, in the words of a song from a Jimmy Cliff movie by the same name, "The harder they come, the harder they fall." Given these realities,

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the ability to redirect energies from individual problems toward collective action is a strategy that social movements might find useful.

Activists who are intent on implementing a better future often overlook the fact that, along with the vision of an ideal society, there comes inevitably a variety of minor frustrations and occasional crises—if only because the movement functions within an existing, imperfect society. By supporting their adherents through crises, the group as a whole benefits. Therefore, the ability to deal effectively with individual problems offers great advantages to both the individual and the group. When these essentially personal perspectives are incorporated into the organization's educational agenda, the group may begin to build its ideal community in the present rather than relegating it to a distant and none-too-certain future.

This paper discusses transformative learning within organizations that strive to promote collective action for democratic change. It begins with a definition of social change organizations. Second, the role of the individual versus the collective will be contextualized in its historical and contemporary settings. Third, the debate between Mezirow and critical theorists concerning context will be discussed and reframed within the larger context of internalized oppression. Last, a brief history of the feminist movement will be given, along with examples of how aspects of transformation theory are currently used in the National Organization for Women (NOW).

### **Social Change Movements**

The phrase, social change movement, encompasses a wide variety of organizations. Using Wilson's (1973) model, social change organizations can be classified into four categories depending on their orientation toward the dominant society: reformative organizations, like NOW; separatist or alternative groups, like the home schooling movement; redemptive groups, like charismatic Christians; and transformative organizations, or those dedicated to structural transformation of society, like those seeking economic justice.

A social movement can be defined from a variety of perspectives. To begin with it must have some structural coherence and stability in order to qualify as an organization at all. If some kind of orderly process does not exist, the movement cannot sustain itself (see, for example, the fate of the massive student movement of the sixties which, after coordinating huge marches and protests, was disbanded as fast as it was organized due to a

fatal lack of structural coherence).

Saul Alinsky (1969), the well-known radical organizer and author of *Reveille for Radicals*, defines a movement as “the orderly development of participation, interest and action by a group of people, for the purpose of articulating demands for change or resistance to change in the social order” (p. 198). This definition suggests the need for management skills to accomplish tasks such as mobilizing participation, arousing interest among followers and potential members, and organizing for action. Without these functional skills, an organization cannot survive for long. Whatever passion animates its adherents will dissipate and the movement will die.

A definition by adult educator Davenport passes over the structural elements to emphasize the organization’s inspirational mission. According to Davenport (as cited in Cunningham, 1989),

A social movement is characterized by a mass effort to reach the minds and hearts of people, to win them over to a new world view, new beliefs that will galvanize them to action and to join in demonstrations against the establishment order. (p. 34)

This definition highlights the sense of purpose that mobilizes and sustains a group. Significantly, while recognizing functional and instrumental involvement of participants, this definition also incorporates their affective involvement.

All groups use education in one form or another to promote their ends; however, their audiences may differ. Some strategies are directed at persuading the public of the righteousness of the cause. This form of education may make use of the mass media or lobbying activities or public demonstrations and protests. On the other hand, organizations must expend a certain amount of time and effort to implant and reaffirm shared beliefs among their own adherents. These objectives may take two forms. Management styles and leadership skills must be taught so that they are consistent with the group’s overarching beliefs; on the other hand, a program may be designed for members and would-be members to understand the basic tenets of the organization. Both of these objectives ultimately support the continuity of the organization, but it is the latter which concerns us here.

Learning takes place in a variety of settings, from school-like classrooms to workshops to informal networks working on the periphery of the core organization. Often education within social change organizations

has retained the informal quality of pre-industrial days when corporate structures were fairly rudimentary. In these groups learning may be almost incidental, as described in a historical study of nineteenth century immigrant socialists in Chicago:

The most important feature . . . was its *informality* [italics in the original]. . . . Education did not usually take place in places given over for one purpose. Rather it happened within the framework of cultural activities, events and non-educational institutions. This education was not “rationally” designed with specific objectives and measurable outcomes but was often temporary, sometimes haphazard, and often transitory. (Schied, 1993, p. 7)

A community experience like this would be difficult to reproduce today. Over time certain leaders within change movements learned to use the technologies that support more sophisticated organizational structures, and, thus, more sophisticated educational systems evolved. The importance of these structures fluctuates as the movement develops.

Like any other organizational entity, a change organization has a life cycle. Hiller (1973) identifies three phases of organizational behavior based on participant orientation. He names the first stage in his “interest” phase, when participants come together to share common ideas and interests. The second phase is the protest or action phase, and the final stage is the perspective phase when the organization becomes “defensive, reformulative, or merely becalmed.” Hiller’s participant-centered analysis is useful when discussing educational programming because such programming can help to absorb the impact of organizational life-cycle fluctuations.

However, education does not automatically become liberatory because it takes place in a non-traditional setting, even when the teachings challenge those of the dominant society. Indeed, what is required as a basis for transformative learning is an awareness and systematic application of emancipatory ideals in either method or content—or both. The next section discusses the shifting ideals of social change organizations in recent years.

### **Collective and Individual Transformation—A History**

In the past few decades the concept of transformative education, though not necessarily known by that name, has arisen almost simulta-

neously in the United States and abroad. The third world produced Paulo Freire and the pedagogy he designed around the central concepts of conscientization and “cultural circles.” His theories, which were grounded in the literacy movement in Brazil, were popularized by his books, of which the best known—and probably least read—is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). At about the same time a segment of the women’s movement in the United States discovered a process which came to be named “consciousness-raising” (CR), which also took place in a group setting. Cultural circles and CR groups produced similar results: priming participants for political action. Although the women’s movement never formulated its practice into a single pedagogical model, both practices were used to help groups to, first, understand and, then, to liberate themselves from an environment which they perceived as being oppressive.

There have been many points of discussion between advocates of the various theories and practices. The issue that concerns us here is the idea of collective practice and its relationship to the individual. The concept of collectivity is the underlying premise of any social movement. The role of the individual in a collective may be different from group to group and may change over time and within each country. In the United States, however, the idea of collectivity is, in and of itself, a contradiction to many of the assumptions governing the lives and activities of most North Americans.

Historically, individualism has permeated every facet of western society, showing particular strength in the upwardly mobile middle and professional classes. Individuals with aspirations toward social mobility have been taught from their earliest years and through high school and college to emulate the lives of those American folk heroes (mostly male) who “pulled themselves up by their own boot-straps.” As a result, traditional Marxists who place great emphasis on collective, radical change, have always been hampered in their struggle in this country. (Although other organizations share the collective orientation, differing primarily in degree, Marxists will be referred to in this paper because their use of collective imagery has been both articulate and unapologetic.)

The most radical ideal espoused by leftist groups, especially Marxist ones, is the submission of the individual to the will of the collective and the primacy of class consciousness. However, since the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the belief that the working class, as a whole, has a critical role to play in the transformation of society has been dealt a severe blow. Marxists have been assailed by doubts

as to the role and effectiveness of the traditional class analysis. To some, faith in the working class as the leader of radical social change appeared to be misplaced; to others, who were never convinced of the special role of the working class (or of the class analysis in general), the recent turn of events simply confirmed their suspicions.

The old social movements were supplanted by newer ones in which trade unionism and related issues were replaced with issues like ecology, peace, gender equity, or any number of other causes. Other movements emphasized individual transformation rather than social transformation as a legitimate outcome of struggle and change (Cunningham, 1998). Taking their cue from the “humanistic psychologies,” which swept the country after the Second World War, these latter “New Age” movements are largely ahistorical, having more or less consciously distanced themselves from the remaining politically-oriented movements. Among feminists, for instance, women’s spirituality groups and the fast-proliferating witch covens are gaining adherents as emphasis on class-based differences has given way to a growing awareness of the hegemony of the patriarchal culture and resulting injustices.

Activists, both male and female, who cling to the traditional agenda of economic justice tend to look upon these developments with derision and dismay. Many critical theorists are skeptical of the need and processes for individual healing and spiritual well being. Not only is the leftist theorist skeptical of individualism, there is also an underlying suspicion toward the theory and practice of psychology, on which transformational theory is largely based. Psychology traditionally has been regarded as the prerogative of society’s elites—an individual indulgence that allows the rich to fiddle with their egos while workers are condemned to a slow burn.

### **Internalized Oppression and Transformation Theory**

Because of recent developments and long-standing biases such as those described above, certain educators have become pessimistic about the future of adult education for social change (see, for example, Peter Jarvis’ recent seminar entitled, “The End of Adult Education as a Social Movement,” given at the Centre for Popular Education in Australia, May, 1999). However, there are critical theorists who are willing to remain engaged in the debate. Among them is Phyllis Cunningham (1998) who, in a recent article in the *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, accepts

the idea of the individual as “biography” because this concept allows for the social construction of reality.

Biography is, by nature, contextual. When Paulo Freire developed his theory of conscientization, he, unlike Mezirow, purposely selected learners who had a common biography: the illiterate rural poor of Brazil’s northeast provinces. Marginalized by the socio-economic system in which they lived and abandoned to a life of poverty, the people responded to Freire’s method of “problematizing” the miserable conditions which the church and the landowners considered normal. Freire was able to teach not only literacy but also to “conscientize” his students by assisting them to understand their relationship, as a class and as individuals, to the dominant structures. Freire used images to contextualize his lessons, involving the whole person at a non-rational level, before attempting to apply cognitive techniques to analyze the situation. His methods met with such success that the threat of revolutionary activity in northeastern Brazil resulted in a coup by the country’s conservative elites. Freire’s subsequent exile led to the dissemination of his ideas to the United States and around the world.

On the basis of Freire’s apparent success in Brazil, some educators applied his ideas in the United States. Unfortunately, these experiments in revolutionary transformation did not live up to their promise (Facundo, 1984). As a result of these and similar experiences, many disappointed followers came to the conclusion that transformational learning was not suited for applications outside of the third world. In so doing, not only was the practice given up, but the theory also lost its original appeal and, with it, the concept of internalized oppression that forms the basis of the entire Freirean dynamic.

This theory states that as a result of the internalization of negative images of themselves, whole classes of people may become silenced and/or confused about the nature of social reality and their place in it. Often used unwittingly by members of the dominant class, this insidious form of oppression helps the powerful maintain control with a minimum of external force—particularly through the use of education. Freire’s pedagogy postulated that by assisting learners to give voice to, and to examine, these internalized messages, they could be eliminated or attenuated, thereby restoring an individual’s sense of agency and purpose and meaning. Personal insight would be followed by renewed energy for action as the individual attempted to reconstruct social reality in light of a new understanding of his/her place in it.

Since Mezirow introduced his version of perspective transformation in the United States more than a decade ago, transformational learning has been again the subject of debate among critical theorists. Mezirow's model appears to move out of the collective context towards a model which approaches perspective transformation from a more individualistic, psychological angle. Indeed, in a chapter in which he describes the role of adult educators in social action organizations, Mezirow's (1991) first prescription for the creation of ideal learning conditions is stated in a single word: "decontextualize." Those who are familiar with Mezirow's writing style know that he is seldom at a loss for words. One cannot help but be impressed by the importance he ascribes to that solitary word, presiding over a series of bulleted phrases. In an apparent contradiction, Mezirow recommends in the next item that learners also become more aware of the "history, context, . . . and consequences of their beliefs" (p. 215).

Mezirow is a master of the rational argument, to the point where he sometimes becomes frustratingly obscure to the average learner-practitioner. Nevertheless, he is not clear about how decontextualization is to take place. One must assume that unless a person is confronted with a disorienting dilemma which temporarily damages or destroys presuppositions and assumptions (that is, context), the process of decontextualization should take place in an educational setting where rational dialogue takes place among learners whose minds are ideally open. This appears to be wishful thinking. Internalized oppression is so pervasive that it is often invisible and, thus, goes completely unnoticed, much as air pollution is unnoticed when it is a constant and inescapable fact of life. Education, exhortation, and political protest hammer away at conscious beliefs while leaving the unconscious bedrock below untouched (Paul, 1998).

However, when the individual is cognitively disengaged due to a crisis or some other form of emotional experience, there is a greater likelihood of breaking through the layers of rationality and rationalizations. At this point unconscious assumptions can be grasped, and thus, more effectively challenged. This breakthrough requires input from both the teacher and the learner. The teacher must have a clear understanding of the oppressive institutions and training in emotional healing processes; the learner must have a modicum of free attention and a desire to undertake the re-evaluation process. With these players in place, the crisis can be understood and its components analyzed. Depending on whether the person belongs to a Marxist cell or a democratic feminist organization or a group of radical environmentalists, the person will understand better



the dominant society and his/her relationship to it. Finally, there is evidence that, through practice, the mental links that connect a person to negative self images can be replaced by those links that connect self images to positive conscious beliefs (Paul, 1998).

An organization with a mission to change society cannot ignore the individuals who are the foot soldiers in the struggle for change. In the next section, the use of perspective transformation, or consciousness raising, in the women's movement will be examined. This case study is ideal because the developments have taken place in the last thirty years—within the span of a lifetime. Furthermore, a variety of organizations were involved in the movement overall. All shared a critique of patriarchy, and, although they did not necessarily espouse a class-based analysis, most have recognized the existence of a form of internalized oppression within their constituencies.

### **Education In the Women's Movement: A Case Study**

As the woman's movement has changed over the past thirty years, the systematic, if informal, practice of "raising consciousness" has lost momentum. The impact of CR groups was greatest at the onset of this most recent phase of the movement, as women uncovered the many (and often surprising) ways that their lives had been shaped by their social context. In the late 1960s small CR groups sprang up in many locations and venues around the United States. Having no permanent headquarters or fixed program, this ephemeral micro-movement nonetheless spread rapidly, affecting tens of thousands of women who were thus sensitized to issues of sex and gender, often in dramatic emotional moments of personal insight. The small group format was an essential component of the experience. By 1970, according to Hymowitz and Weissman (1978), CR groups had become the "heart and soul of the women's liberation movement" (p. 351).

These authors distinguish between the women's liberation movement and the women's rights movement, which has been represented since 1966 by NOW. One of the many "identity groups" which spun out of the massive student anti-war and counter-culture movements of the 1960s, NOW became a fixture on the North American political scene, outliving its amorphous predecessor by many years. Technically a special interest group, albeit one which can claim to represent over half the population of the United States, NOW was created originally as a reformist advocacy organization engaged primarily in legislative politics and litigation. When

it was founded, NOW was made up of a group of approximately 300 women, mostly middle-class professionals who were organized conventionally into a board of directors, with executives and committees for carrying out a variety of tasks. Its goal has been, and still is, to “take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men” (DiTullio, 1999, p. 5).

In the mid-1970s radical feminists, many of whom had “graduated” from CR groups, split off from the male-dominated left. Their own personal liberation had been instrumental in developing their vision of a radically transformed society. Rather than participating in the mainstream of the movement, the radical feminists wanted to awaken women to the limited nature of their culturally assigned roles and then devise tactics to help bring patriarchy to its knees. They continued to be committed to the confrontational tactics developed by the left.

However, although radical feminists were able to get the attention of the media with “zap actions” and other dramatic tactics, the small groups didn’t have the stability or the longevity of the well organized NOW. Their small, informal group structures were more effective for raising women’s consciousness than for a long-term struggle against the system. By the latter half of the 1970s the CR groups were a thing of the past. Not only were some of the more radical women moderating their tactics, but a wing of the NOW membership was willing to be more daring. Responding to criticism from the leftist women, the larger organization began to address broader issues like the lack of diversity within its membership (including gay activists who had been snubbed by the professional women of NOW) and class issues which affected minorities and less privileged women. However, after incorporating the radical contingent into the mainstream, the nurturing of “emotional intelligence,” which characterized the CR groups, has been de-emphasized.

In the 1980s the organization placed most of its resources into the all-out struggle for the passage of the equal rights amendment. The movement survived the failure of the effort and has recovered partially, but the early electrifying breakthroughs for women have given way to smaller incremental successes that require an equal amount of effort for less apparent gain. If NOW remains intact as an organization, this persistence will be due, in part, to the fact that, within its robust organizational structure, it has been able to educate and mobilize its members in the development and management of new chapters. However, the organization’s educational efforts have been primarily instrumental. The publication of *Ms.*

magazine, founded in 1972, has advanced the cause of women's rights and women's liberation despite a succession of funding problems. In addition, alongside the original organization, the NOW leadership established in 1986 an educational foundation whose leadership and staff overlaps, and shares offices with, the parent group.

One of the major challenges of the movement today is to tap into the energies of a new generation of young women. This new group is generally younger than the current NOW membership, and the formation of new chapters is done by educating these younger women. In the literature produced by the central organization to assist in the formation of new chapters, there is no mention of consciousness raising activities. According to the guidelines provided, NOW meetings are devoted to the business, like the routine election of officers and the establishment of committees, of maintaining the organization. Ceremonial functions include the distribution of awards and other types of member recognition. Detailed guidelines for forming new chapters make no mention of other types of activities, although careful distinctions are drawn regarding engaging in appropriate action agendas, as opposed to the types of "service" work that can be performed by volunteers.

Vestiges of consciousness raising activities remain in the form of occasional workshops where women are given an opportunity to speak out about their problems and the feelings that accompany them. One such workshop took place at a recent convention held by the Pennsylvania NOW organization in November, 1999. Entitled "Never Trust a Whistling Woman," this workshop was the only learner-centered offering at the event. (Other workshop topics addressed worker's rights, body image, women in media, and resources for women.) During the session participants discussed the ways in which fear has kept them from trusting their own thinking and becoming more actively involved in the movement. The passion for change, the oppression (both internal and external) which limits vision, the need for critical reflection, and, of course, the need for action are all elements of transformative learning. These topics were only alluded to in the workshop. However, in the organization's recent newsletter, chapter president Barbara DiTullio demonstrated a clear understanding of these educational components. Discussing the meaning of being an activist, DiTullio (1999) writes:

I believe there are two types of obstacles to activism: external forces outside our direct control, and personal barriers, like being afraid to speak in public, making mistakes, or feeling you are not smart enough

to do the job. . . . When you care passionately about an issue and want to get at the root of the problem, solve it, you take action—that's when you become an activist." (p. 5)

This brief excerpt contains all the elements that might be included in an educational program for transformational learning within a NOW chapter. Obviously, in order to capture the potential of individual transformation, the single educational "unit" included in the workshop would have to be expanded into a full-scale curriculum. Here individuals would be able to commit to a long-term process where they could examine their feelings and take the time to reflect and heal from the negative effects of societal pressures and expectations. They might examine personal distress around leadership issues; the possibility (indeed, the probability) of making occasional, but highly visible, mistakes; dealing with attacks from inside and outside the organization; and trusting other members to provide continuing support for individual efforts by holding out the shared vision of the group.

### Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to show that, to the extent that an organization creates the space to live out its vision in present time, it can accelerate the achievement of its goals for social betterment. Unfortunately, the messy process of individual healing that precedes perspective transformation does not appeal generally either to the academician or to the traditional organizer, who believes that his/her primary role is to direct the action and "organize the troops." However, in an educational setting within the context of a class-based, social change movement, the collective practice of perspective transformation can convey useful lessons to other learners about the harmful effects of hegemonic structures and their programs and expectations. It can also heighten the urgency of the need to rectify injustices resulting from societal inequities.

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