



HM Prison &
Probation Service



Learning
Together

Keeping connected: introducing ThinkLets

Learning Together builds educational communities that bring together people who live, study and work in universities and criminal justice organisations. Together, we want to use the power of education to improve lives, institutions and communities.

Covid-19 is a major challenge to our health and wellbeing. It means that we cannot physically come together as a community to learn with and from each other. But we can still keep learning and supporting each other to stay hopeful, positive and engaged.

Members of the Learning Together Network have created ThinkLets to help us all keep connected. Each ThinkLet contains resources that will help us to think about new ideas and develop new skills together, even from afar.

Each week, for the next eight weeks, two ThinkLets will be shared across our national community. We hope you enjoy them and find them helpful.

**Keep well. Keep hopeful. Keep connected.
And keep Learning Together.**

Please note:

The following resource was created with love and care by a member of the Learning Together Network. We sincerely hope that the creator's work will be respected by distributors, readers and users, and will not be subject to plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. Thank you for your cooperation.

ThinkLet #11

Transformative Learning

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This ThinkLet reflects on a key question at the heart of Further and Higher education and, indeed, the Learning Together community: it considers the question 'what is possible when we learn?'.

In exploring some of the many ways in which this can be answered, this piece focuses on the role of education in transformation. It provides an overview of some theoretical perspectives which can help us to begin to consider the ways in which education can be transformative.

Adults learning: different to children learning

An important starting point in thinking about how we can see education as transformative is the distinction between the processes of learning that we go through as children and those that are open to us as adults.

Malcolm Knowles (1984) set the scene for these distinctions and outlined six assumptions of adults as learners. He argues that adult learners:

- Are independent, autonomous beings who can self-direct their own learning
- Have life experience which provides a significant learning resource
- Are goal-oriented
- Are relevancy-oriented
- Focus on practicality, meaning adult learners encourage collaboration



It is from this baseline that many theories exploring the experiences of adult learners begin.

Initial reflection and discussion questions:

- How can these assumptions shape the types of education that is provided?
- In what ways can these ideas shape the role that a 'teacher' should have?
- Can you reflect on an experience where you felt you learned a skill or developed knowledge related to a goal that you had or that was practical and collaborative?
- Do you agree that these assumptions are relevant to creating a 'good' approach to learning?
- Are there other points that you think are relevant?

Mezirow's Transformative Learning: perspective transformation

Jack Mezirow first conceived of his theory of transformative learning in the 1970s and it has developed to become a central pillar in the understanding of adult learning. From this approach, *'learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action'* (Mezirow 1991, p. 162).

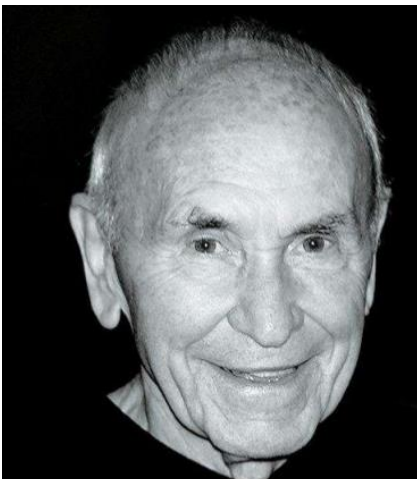
Mezirow argued that transformative learning occurs when one revises an existing 'meaning perspective' (Mezirow, 1978; 1991) or 'culturally defined frame of reference' (Taylor, 1998: 13) that acts as a filter to the meaning given to experiences. Mezirow separates learning into instrumental (task-oriented and problem solving for improved performance) and dialogic (or communicative) learning. 'Dialogic learning' emphasises the significance of 'argumentation' in learning, and it is through this that perspective transformation may occur. Here, we can see the importance of coming together, sharing our points of view and discussing our perspectives in creating opportunities for transformative learning to take place.

According to Mezirow, there are ten phases that may lead to the 'perspective transformation' that he argues is a central element of *transformative learning*:

- 1) A disorienting dilemma
- 2) Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- 3) A critical assessment of assumptions
- 4) Recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
- 5) Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
- 6) Planning a course of action
- 7) Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing these plans
- 8) Provisionally trying out new roles
- 9) Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- 10) Reintegration into one's life on the basis of one's new perspective

(Mezirow, 1995: 50)

Perspective Transformation is...



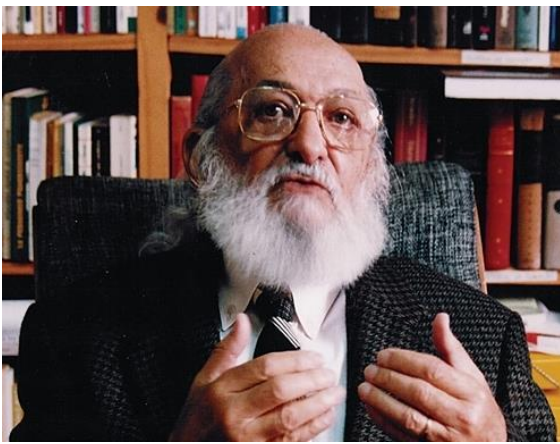
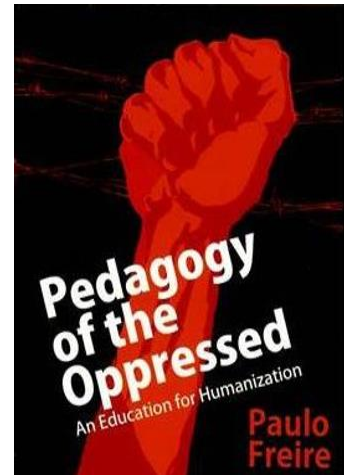
...the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.

Mezirow (1991, p. 167)

Paulo Friere: education for social transformation

Another way of considering the transformative potential of education can be seen in the work of Paulo Friere.

Friere (pictured) was a Brazilian educationalist and teacher whose experiences growing up in an unequal society of Brazil heavily informed his ideas of the power and purpose of education. His book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (published in 1968) became central to an understanding of 'critical pedagogy' – a radical way of thinking about education and teaching that seeks to empower students to think critically about their educational situation and position this within wider issues of class, race and other forms of power structure.



Richard Shaull, in his preface to Friere's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', states that "Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world".

Similar to Mezirow's ideas of transformation explored above, Friere sees critical reflection as an important part of the transformative learning. He too sees dialogue as a central tool for promoting empowering education – resisting an approach that favours a monologue style of learning. However, instead of this leading to a personal transformation (of the type which Mezirow describes), Friere sees education as a tool for social change and what he terms *emancipatory transformation*.

An important element of Friere's perspective is that teaching should be embedded within the lived experience of those participating in the educational activities. This approach therefore encourages educators to work in an informal way and broadens the activities which can be seen as educational. It also promotes an educational relationship (between teacher and student) built upon horizontal relationships – those which are democratic and assume an equality of power between the 'teacher' and the 'student'.

Friere coins the powerful phrase '**education as the practice of freedom**' in his argument that education is inherently a political practice. As Giroux states, this is because Friere sees that education 'offers students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and particular notions of critical agency' (2010). It is through these processes that Friere argues that education provides the tools of both resistance and hope.

Final reflection and discussion questions:

- Which of these ideas of transformative learning do you prefer?
- Do you think education can be valuable in creating individual and social change?
- Can you think of a positive learning experience where your perspective was transformed? What happened? Who was involved in this learning experience?
- Building on your reflections above, how can these approaches shape the role of the teacher (or facilitator) and the student?