

# FOSTERING TRANSFORMATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE PROCESS OF A TRAINING PERSPECTIVES QUESTIONNAIRE DEVELOPMENT

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**ABSTRACT:** This work-in progress research design focuses on the development process of a *Training Perspectives Questionnaire* to investigate how trainers and consultants conceive training and to promote awareness about themselves as trainers. The study was developed within the project "Soft Skills: Aware, Competent and Competitive", led by an Italian training centre in cooperation with the University of Padova. Twenty-four professionals were involved in a 24-hour training program that proposed methods and techniques inspired by experiential learning and outdoor training to promote their professional development. This research connects the literature on and practice of professional development in the field of training and consultancy with Transformative Learning theory. A mixed method approach including a sequential exploratory strategy (QUAL-quant) was used to develop the instrument. The themes from the interviews have been integrated with dimensions identified through the literature review process and are presented here. (Cranton & King, 2003; This paper presents a work-in-progress research design focused on a professional development program for to technical trainers and consultants to improve their generic skills and enhance awareness of their consulting styles and approaches. This research connects two main theoretical foci: first, *Organizational Development* to identify research and tools developed to investigate and recognize consulting and training styles (Bierema, 2014; Block, 2011; Cockman, et al., 1996; Lippitt & Lippitt, 1986; Schein, 1987); and, second, Transformative *Learning* theory and research developed under this frame in the field of professional development King, 2004).

**Keywords:** training perspective questionnaire, transformative, professional development

## Theoretical Background

The first theoretical frame refers to organizational development. Starting from the early 1980s, organizational development studies and practices focused on organizational values and culture. Schein (1987), a prominent culture scholar, distinguished different types of clients and consulting approaches. Later, other authors identified multiple roles played by consultants (Block, 1999; 2011) and observed consultant behaviors and their role in the consulting process (Lippitt & Lippitt, 1986), highlighting essential skills and competencies (Block, 2011; Burke, 1992).

This led to the development and administration of several inventories to investigate and recognize consulting styles. Many other inventories were specifically conceived to help trainers explore training approaches and beliefs about the teaching and learning process. Those developed for consultants and for trainers are both intended for use in professional development work. For instance, the *Consulting-Style Inventory* was created to explore trainers' and consultants' styles (Lippitt & Lippitt, 1986); the *Trainer Type Inventory* was specifically designed for trainers based on the assumption that trainers train others most comfortably using their own favoured learning styles (Jones & Pfeiffer, 1979; Kolb, 1976; Kolb & Fry, 1981); the *Training Style Inventory* was designed to explore various

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beliefs about the teaching and learning process and the use of various methods and techniques (Brostrom, 1975); and the *Instructional Styles Diagnosis Inventory* was designed to provide feedback on trainers' instructional styles (Cripple, 1996).

Other inventories like the *Student-Content Teaching Inventory* (Spier, 1994) and the *Teaching Perspectives Inventory* (Pratt & Collins, 2000; Pratt, Collins, & Selinger, 2001). focus on teaching philosophies and teachers' assumptions about the teaching and learning process. The analysis of these inventories shows that, on the one hand, tools designed for teachers focus on the investigation of teaching philosophies; on the other hand, tools conceived for consultants and trainers focus more on training/consulting styles - from non-directive to directive styles to and less (or just indirectly) on trainers' philosophies of training.

The second theoretical frame, which was based on transformative learning theory, was chosen to define the research methodology and to develop an interview protocol to encourage critical reflection on the learning and training experience by the research participants. As Taylor (2008) explains, “[T]ransformative learning theory explains [the] learning process of constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world” (p. 1). Disorienting dilemmas, personal and social crisis, and situations that question the very core of our existence or its dimensions (job, education, family, etc.) can encourage perspective transformation. In the process of daily life, we make sense of the world through our experiences and through this recurring and continuous process, we develop habits of mind and a frame of reference to understand the world. When something different happens, we can be encouraged to question our perspective about the world.

In the field of professional development, recent research has focused on the professional development as adult learning, and transformative learning theory is a valuable frame to investigate adult learning (King, 2004). Cranton and King (2003) also focused on transformative learning as a professional development goal for adult educators and how transformative learning supports them by helping adult educators to become more authentic and question habits of mind as teachers. The authors explain that “when educators are led to examine their practice and thereby acquire alternative ways of understanding what they do, transformative learning about teaching takes place” (Cranton & King, 2003, p. 32). Therefore, professional development programs need to incorporate activities that encourage content, process, and premise reflection (Cranton, 1996; Cranton & King, 2003; Kreber, 2012; Taylor & Mezirow, 2012).

A transformative learning approach can promote critical self-reflection about training and consulting and related habits of mind. Transformative learning can also help researchers understand how trainers and consultants perceive training. This study investigates participant experiences in terms of both transformative learning and professional development experience. The classical work developed by Mezirow (1975; 1978) underlines that we make meaning of the world through our experiences and we develop habits of mind and frame of reference to understand the world and explain new events starting from previous ones. This process is uncritically and based on our daily living. Only new events that don't fit with our daily, uncritical way of conceiving the world can

activate a process of self and critical reflection in order to understand and give meaning to new situations and experiences. As Cranton & King (2003) highlight, this process happens also in relation with our way of conceiving teaching. “Our habits of mind about teaching, are absorbed as we experience life. We acquire values and assumptions about teaching from the community and society we live in, from the institution we work in, and from family, friends, and colleagues” (Cranton & King, 2003, p. 33). Indeed, a professional development program can be considered as an experience with the potential of opening up the participants’ frame of reference, of letting them discard a habit of mind, of encouraging them to see alternatives, and of letting them act differently in their job as teachers or, in the case of this paper, as trainers (Mezirow, et al., 2000; Cranton & King, 2003).

### **Research Context**

This study was developed within the "Soft Skills: Aware, Competent and Competitive" project, led by an Italian training centre in cooperation with the University of Padova and financed by regional funds. The project, which is still in progress, started in March 2017 and involves 24 technical trainers, information specialists, consultant experts and SME staff in charge of training activities as internal or external consultants in different contexts and sectors (companies, third sector, schools and training centres, etc.). The “Soft Skills” project aims to provide trainers with professional development opportunities to enhance awareness about their approaches and styles as trainers and to improve generic skills. Participants were involved in a 24-hour program, part indoor and part outdoor. The program was inspired by experiential learning and outdoor training approaches (Di Nubila & Fedeli, 2010; Kolb, 1984; Rotondi, 2004) and used cooking, orienteering and adventure sessions to work on communication, team building and networking, flexibility, and change management.

### **Research Design**

#### **Research questions**

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of developing a *Training Perspectives Questionnaire*, a tool useful to explore trainers’ and consultants’ training perspectives. The process was carried out according to three research questions:

- I. What are the participants’ perspectives about training and consultation?
- II. How do trainers/consultants translate their perspectives in practice?
- III. How to develop an instrument for investigating training and consultation perspectives?

#### **Participants**

A convenience group of 10 trainers who participated in the training of the “Soft Skill” project was involved in the collection data phase of the research. Their areas of expertise included Marketing & Communication, Safety/Environment, Integrated Management Systems (safety/environment/quality), Social Co-operation, Quality Management and Systems, Company Organisation, IT, Accounting services.

## Method and Procedures

A mixed method approach using a sequential exploratory strategy (QUAL-quant) (Creswell, 2008; Ellinger, Watkins, & Marsick, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) was used by the research group to develop the instrument.

The sequential exploratory strategy has two research phases; the most important was carried out using a qualitative approach from which researchers are developing the quantitative phase. The first phase focused on the first two research questions and used qualitative data collection. The first phase used a semi-structured approach that was developed to account for the following dimensions: personal information (gender, organization, role, education, years of experience), percent of training and/or consultancy activity, attendance at previous professional development programs, professional and personal expectations, training/consultation perspectives, and key elements of their training/consultation actions.

These were the most important components of the interview:

- I. Use of metaphors of knowledge (Fabbri & Munari, 2010) to mediate the interview. Their power consists of playing the role of a cognitive tool useful to explore the approach to knowledge and experience of the interviewees. These metaphors engaged the participants in a reflective process concerning their conceptions of training and consultation.
- II. Investigation of significant events of the participants' experience connected to real life as trainers (Marsick, 1998). Supported by the metaphors of knowledge, participants were invited to reflect on the key elements of their approaches to training and consultation, mentioning clear episodes (actions, behaviors, activities).
- III. Investigation of the possible transformation of participants' training perspectives and practices as a result of the experienced training program.

Interviews were audiotaped with the consent of the participants and then transcribed to facilitate the data analysis process.

The themes that came to light from this qualitative exploratory phase were compared and integrated with factors identified through the analysis of existing instruments and the literature. At the end of this stage, researchers identified factors to be considered in the development of the questionnaire.

The second in-progress research phase will be led by the third research question and will focus on the operationalization of the perspectives into scales. The original pool of items will be reviewed in a two-hour session by a panel of five expert trainers to discuss and compare the clarity of the items.

After creating a first draft into a Likert scale format, a pilot test will be carried out. The quantitative data collection will allow researchers further revise items, test reliabilities and internal scale consistencies (*alpha*), and test the validity of the constructs through the factor analysis, in order to finalize the *Training Perspectives Questionnaire*.

## Findings

Analysis of the interviews highlighted some recurring themes that led to the definition of 5 main training/consultation perspectives:

*“Client’s Needs Centred”*: The trainer’s/consultant’s attention is focused on the clarification and “diagnosis” (Schein, 1987) of the client’s problems and needs. The trainer’s/consultant’s role is to isolate the causes of the problem, generate and evaluate alternative solutions, and develop an action plan that meets the client’s needs (Lippitt & Lippitt, 1986). The consultant’s main responsibility is the diagnostic process. Quoting an interviewee, this perspective is focused on the “the clear understanding of client’s needs... to satisfy them and to foster his/her loyalty.”

*“Consultant’s Expertise Centred”*: According to this approach, the trainer/consultant offers the client his/her expertise in terms of knowledge and competencies. This approach is strongly content-centred and client intensive (Schein, 1987). The trainer/consultant provides instruction, information, or other directed learning opportunities in the role of a content expert (Lippitt & Lippitt, 1986). As Schein (1978) states, the client expects support from an expert and expects to pay for that support to help solve the client’s problems. The essence of this approach is: “here is the problem, bring me back an answer and tell me how much it will cost” (Schein, 1978, p. 340). One participant explained: “My role is to offer my expertise, in terms of knowledge and skills, to be recognized as reliable by my client. Previous experience and concrete examples are crucial”.

*“Client’s Transformative Learning”*: The trainer/consultant encourages a change in the client’s perspectives related to security, quality, and different expertise topics, and the trainer/consultant offers the client the opportunity to question his/her assumptions on the topic (Cranton & King, 2003; Taylor, 2008). The approach is process- and client-centred. One participant stated: “My aim is to offer my clients the opportunity to develop assumptions, through a facilitative approach, to invite them to question their assumptions about...”.

*“Organizational Culture Innovation”*: The trainer/consultant offers the client the opportunity for the emergence of meanings, for sharing them, and for clarifying values and beliefs related to the topic (Schein, 1987). In this perspective, the approach is also process- and client-centred. This theme is similar to the previous one but with a specific focus on organizational culture (e.g. the culture of security). Participants explained: “My aim is to foster culture, encouraging sharing of meanings” and “My role is to be a culture agent and encourage change of cultural perspective about...”.

Both *client’s transformative learning* and *organizational culture innovation* focus on change. The first focuses on change from an individual point of view, and the second from an organizational one. The assumption that underlies these two perspectives recognizes the trainer/consultant as a facilitator rather than a content expert, as assumed by the previous two perspectives: *client’s needs centred* and *consultant’s expertise centred*.

Fifth and last perspective, “*Relationship centred*”: based on a holistic orientation, the trainer/consultant encourages the engagement of the client in other ways of knowing, such as the relational and affective ones (Taylor, 2008). According to this perspective, the trainer/consultant pays attention to the interpersonal process events (communication, feelings and emotions, conflict, etc.) rather than needs, problems or contents. As one of the interviewees underlines: “My aim is to create a relationship with my clients and base my work on it”.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The integration between qualitative data collection and theoretical factors allowed the researchers to identify trainers/consultants’ training perspectives: *client’s needs centred*, *consultant’s expertise centred*, *client’s transformative learning*, *organizational culture innovation*, and *relationship centred*.

The on-going second phase consists of the operationalization of the perspectives into scales using categories related to training, actions, and intentions. The last step will be the final version of the questionnaire as a useful instrument to examine the training perspectives in a systematic way. The tool has different potential: i) supporting trainers, not only in gaining awareness of their perspectives and their consequent changes, but also in the examination of their personal beliefs and values about training/consultation; ii) supporting trainers and consultants in facilitation and skills development; iv) encouraging reflective practice to promote innovation and a lifelong learning and professional development approach for trainers and consultants as learners.

In conclusion, apart from having the peculiarity to become a tool to foster critical reflection and personal and professional development, the *Training Perspective Questionnaire* offers the opportunity to fill the literature gap because no instruments focused on consultants/trainers perspectives have been previously developed. In fact, if the inventories previously created were centred on some specific aspects, such as consultants’ style (Jones & Pfeiffer, 1979; Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986), trainers’ beliefs about training (Brostrom, 1975), providing feedback on trainers instructional styles (Cripple, 1996), the questionnaire here presented is focused on the investigation of consultants/trainers’ perspectives combining different aspects: beliefs, actions, and intentions about training.

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