

# (NON)PREPARATION TO LIVE IN ANOTHER COUNTRY: CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES AS PRECURSORS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AMONG NIGERIAN IMMIGRANTS IN ITALY

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**ABSTRACT:** Migration is a significant life event that usually triggers cross-cultural preparedness and the need for learning, even transformative learning. This exploratory study answers two research questions: How do Nigerian immigrants describe their preparedness for cross-cultural transition in Italy? What are the indications of transformative learning processes and outcomes in the immigrants' narrations? Emerging results from six semi-structured interviews with six Nigerian immigrants in Italy are presented. Narratives and themes from the interviews showed evidence of preparation (nonlearning and learning) as well as nonpreparation for cross-cultural transition among the immigrants. Participants' preparedness was associated with their motivation to emigrate, cross-cultural experiences, and proficiency in the Italian language. Also, their cross-cultural experiences pointed to different aspects in processes and outcomes of transformative learning. Disorienting dilemmas of individual participants were identified. The study concluded a further inquiry could show how Nigerian immigrants' cross-cultural transition leads to various outcomes of transformative learning.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural transition, migration preparedness, disorienting dilemma, perspective transformation, Nigeria-Italy migration, Nigerian immigrants

Cross-cultural transition (CCT) is the psychosocial change process migrants experience when they move from their habitual sociocultural context to another. CCT happens across the physical-mental-social domain, during the predeparture, transit, and post arrival phases of migration. CCT is a universal pre integration phenomenon among intercultural migrants. The implication is immigrants' initial experiences before immersion in the second culture might have a long-term effect on their integration process. Research has established migration triggers the need for transformative learning, resulting in fundamental change in the migrant's perspective (Bethel et al., 2020; Onosu, 2020; Taylor, 1994). Meanwhile, adults make use of their aspirations and capacities for (non)migration purposes (de Haas, 2021), suggesting preparedness—which involves anticipating and responding to uncertain future experiences and outcomes (Carroll, 2010)—essentially relates to CCT. However, the role of migration preparedness in cross-cultural experiences and transformative learning has not garnered sufficient research attention.

Hence, this study explores migration experiences of Nigerian immigrants in Italy with a view to examining their preparedness for cross-cultural transition and identifying precursors/indications of transformative learning. Two research questions were developed: *How do Nigerian immigrants describe their preparedness for cross-cultural transition in Italy?* and *What are the indications of TL processes and outcomes in the immigrants' narrations?* Participants' answers to these questions would illuminate our

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understanding of migration/cross-cultural experiences as having or not having a deterministic connection to perspective transformation. The study explored migration experiences involving the periods before immigrants departed Nigeria, during transit, and after arrival (during their settling period in Italy). Attention was paid to two broad dimensions of preparation related to non-learning (general preparation such as visa application, shopping, etc.) and learning (acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values). Participants' experiences and preparation were explored in relation to possible connections to transformative learning. However, determining the extent of perspective transformation among participants was beyond the scope of this study.

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning leads to perspective transformation by challenging and critically reviewing taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin one's habits of mind and consequent points of view (Mezirow, 2000). An individual can significantly learn from a fundamental change resulting from their "lived, felt experience" (Hoggan, 2016, p. 71). Transcultural experiences are often strong enough to cause a disorienting dilemma, which may become the basis for intercultural perspective transformation (Taylor, 2017). From its classic 10-phase model (Mezirow, 2000), Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) has evolved to a multi-strand theory or even a metatheory (Hoggan, 2016; Stuckey et al., 2013). Three dominant strands of transformative learning have emerged; they are identified as rational/cognitive, extrarational, and social/emancipatory perspectives. Stuckey et al. explain:

One is the cognitive/rational perspective... that emphasizes rationality, critical reflection, and ideal conditions for discourse. This is a constructivist and universal view of learning... The second perspective has been called an extrarational perspective... it emphasizes the emotive, imaginal, spiritual, and arts-based facets of learning, those that reach beyond rationality... The third is the social critique perspective... that emphasizes ideological critique, unveiling oppression, and social action in the context of transformative learning. (2013, pp. 213-214)

Based on these perspectives, Stuckey et al. (2013) identified four outcomes and 15 processes as enumerated in Table 1. This study adopted the multiple perspectives because they offer an eclectic approach for exploring possible transformative learning among Nigerian immigrants in Italy. A multiple lens approach for inquiry into how Nigerian immigrants in Italy have experienced transformation is necessary to examine the cross-cultural and intercultural nature of their experiences and structures that have influenced their migratory and learning experiences. Deploying TLT as a multidimensional process was essential for this study because it focused on learning in cross-cultural settings among immigrants with potentially diverse socioeconomic and migratory biographies.

**Table 1.** *Outcomes and Processes of Transformative Learning*

Outcomes	Processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Acting differently</li><li>● Having a deeper self-awareness</li><li>● Having more open perspectives</li><li>● Experiencing a deep shift in worldview</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Cognitive/rational<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Critical reflection</li><li>○ Action</li><li>○ Experience</li><li>○ Disorienting dilemma</li><li>○ Discourse</li></ul></li><li>● Beyond rational/extrarational<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Arts based</li><li>○ Dialogue</li><li>○ Emotional</li><li>○ Imaginal</li><li>○ Spiritual</li><li>○ Soul work</li></ul></li><li>● Social critique<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Ideology critique</li><li>○ Unveiling oppression</li><li>○ Empowerment</li><li>○ Social action</li></ul></li></ul>

*Note.* Reprinted from “Developing a survey of transformative learning outcomes and processes based on theoretical principles,” by H. L. Stuckey, E.W. Taylor, & P. Cranton, 2013, *Journal of Transformative Education*, 11(4), p. 217. Copyright 2016 by Stuckey et al.

## Methodology

This paper reports an aspect of an ongoing exploratory sequential mixed methods study whereby the researcher commenced with a qualitative research phase and explored participants’ views, analysed data, and used the information to build the quantitative phase (Creswell, 2014). Narrative research design is adopted for the QUAL component; this involved asking individual participants to provide stories about their lives (Riessman, 2008). Ten participants were selected in the Veneto Region of Italy using purposive sampling technique. Participants (interviewees) were selected based on certain criteria including year of arrival in Italy, immigration status, occupation, ethnicity, gender, and mode of transportation/entry. All participants moved to Italy when they were aged 18 or older. They were contacted at Nigerian community meetings and online platforms and by referral.

A semi-structured interview guide was used for initial exploration of Nigerian immigrants’ preparedness for cross-cultural transition vis-à-vis transformative learning. The second interview with each participant delved deeper into participants’ transformative learning. The self-designed “*G2G Semi-Structured Interview Guide*” helped researchers capture participants’ migration stories, circumstances surrounding

their preparedness for migration to Italy, their learning experiences/initiatives, and their sociodemographics. The first interview was a precursor to the second interview, which was an in-depth exploration of context of the participant's migration and identification of possible transformative learning experiences. The instrument contains 15 open-ended questions with probes and prompts. Exemplar questions: How would you describe your life in Nigeria before coming to Italy? What motivated you to leave Nigeria? How did you prepare for moving to and living in Italy? How was the preparation and the relocation like emotionally? What and how did you learn in order to migrate and live in Italy successfully? Describe what it was like when you first landed in Italy. How were the next several days and weeks?

Each participant read the *Informed Consent Form* and was encouraged to ask questions or express concerns before signing the form and agreeing to commencement of the data generation session. At the outset of each interview, the researcher and participant discussed the inquiry's purpose, anonymity, confidentiality, incentive, and logistics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All participants were referred to by pseudonyms in the research report. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Data analyzed in this paper were generated from semi-structured interviews with six participants. Narrative analysis and thematic analysis techniques were used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis technique is useful for highlighting commonalities and differences across a dataset while narrative analysis is helpful in the interpretive analysis of particularity and setting it in more general contexts (Shukla et al., 2014). Atlas.ti software aided data coding and analyses.

## Findings

Below we present and discuss the emerging results from analysis of participants' descriptions and narrations of circumstances surrounding their immigration to Italy with two goals: determining participants' preparedness for Nigeria-Italy transition and identifying elements of the processes and outcomes of transformative learning such as disorienting dilemmas.

### Preparedness for Cross-cultural Transition in Italy

In participants' narrations, patterns of preparation and non-preparation emerged. To begin, (non)preparation can be broadly parsed into two categories: general preparation for migration and migration learning.

#### *General Preparation for Migration*

General preparation refers to universal, non-specific, and even "common sense" activities and processes the emigrant performed to execute their migration plan/aspiration and ensure a successful journey and settling in their new residence. To distinguish these activities from explicitly educative activities and processes, we refer to it as *nonlearning preparation*.

**Motivation To Leave Nigeria.** Participants had varying reasons for leaving Nigeria and becoming immigrants in Italy. Bimpe, Amaka, and Jackson emigrated to live

with their spouses in Italy. Dele and Ajoke emigrated to live with their parents and study at graduate level. These seem to be their immediate motivations. Even though Henry decided to travel abroad after experiencing a traumatic culture clash, he said, “It didn't motivate me to go out from my nation because home is home.” Participants' narrations indicate their motivations were connected to other factors. For instance, Jackson recounted travelling to the United States was his childhood dream, and travelling abroad was a trial in the community where he grew up in Southern Nigeria: “Basically, it was like the way you already grew up. You saw that people come from abroad and they are living better” (Jackson).

**Visa Application.** Normally, in modern migration systems, obtaining a visa is a basic requirement for traveling. Participants who travelled by air described how their preparation for travelling to Italy involved application for visa by themselves or with assistance of a consulting agency. Some participants recollected the process of obtaining a visa was tiresome. “Well, it was quite a long journey because the visa that we got was called a family visa” (Dele).

### *Not Doing Enough and Nonpreparation*

Participants told stories of what should have been done better. Ajoke, who came to Italy to live with her family and study for a Master's degree, did not have an easy way to reside in Italy legally. She obtained admission at an Italian University, but she was not granted a visa. She decided to obtain a tourist visa to a neighboring country (within the Schengen area) with the plan to enter Italy and convert her visa to a studies visa. She experienced various difficulties beyond her expectation before she got a residence permit. Against this background, Ajoke concluded she did not prepare effectively for her attempt to study in Italy:

I should have done more, like building up my account that I was going to use for financial support. I just left it at normal earnings, like what I had, I didn't declare enough to really prove that I could fund myself. I didn't really convince the consular. (Ajoke)

However, despite the universality of preparing for travelling as an adult, certain circumstances might not permit what a particular migrant would regard as “preparation.” A participant, Henry, narrated how he was deceived and made to embark on a journey of which destination he did not know, even though he wanted to leave Nigeria. Thus, he insisted, “No. There was no preparation”.

That very day I left. I went to Lagos to meet my uncle. So, from there, I was trying to do some internship at the computer village at Lagos. I was living at Ajah with my uncle because he's, um, he's a doctor, a nurse. He studied medicine. So, my aim was also to start off my computer life there. So, but it didn't work as plan. So, I said, okay, uh, we, I have to travel. So, we met some agency. Of which it was my uncle that introduced me to these people. You know, I don't know them before, but as your uncle, you don't have that mindset that maybe your uncle, they

will dupe you, something like that. ... And they presented to me some passport. I thought it was original. (Henry)

Henry later discovered he would travel through the desert to Libya. From Libya he got to Italy by boat and was put in prison immediately because he was wrongly accused and convicted of organising and smuggling irregular migrants to Italy. Even though Henry wanted to leave Nigeria, took steps to meet his uncle, and had an “agency” that could help in realising his dream, Henry was convinced he did not have any predeparture preparation because of the manner he was made to travel. This suggests the participant recognised that being an adult, his migratory agency was taken away from him, and he was stripped of the capacity, or rather, the opportunity to make basic preparation for the journey.

### ***Preparing by Learning (Migration Learning)***

Participants engaged in intentional and unintentional learning activities at various stages of their migration periods. Such activities included learning about Italian culture and civics through books and electronic media. For instance, Bimpe had lived in an Eastern European country before going back to live in Nigeria and then migrating to Italy. Bimpe narrated how her previous travel experience was especially useful in preparation for Italy, especially in the aspect of being mindful of essential items she would need in Italy. Bimpe added, “So definitely I knew I was coming to a new country to have their own bounds, which I just have to obey.” Confined within the four corners of a prison, Henry realized the need to learn about the country he was in. He learned the Italian language, civics, and geography. “When I was in prison, I studied the map of Italy, and I saw Padova” (Henry).

**The Italian Language.** Learning or not learning the Italian language was a significant part of participants’ cross-cultural transition. While some began to learn basics of the language before coming to Italy, they did not attain a reasonable proficiency until they settled in new residences. They acknowledged centrality of the lingua franca to living successfully in Italy. Amaka started learning Italian in Nigeria: “First I needed to learn the language; I learned on Google and also used YouTube.” Jackson pointedly identified the language issue as a challenge “because everything they do is the Italian language... So I had to buy an Italian dictionary ahead of time, trying to seize the opportunity in Nigeria to kind of prepare myself with little phrases and all that” (Jackson).

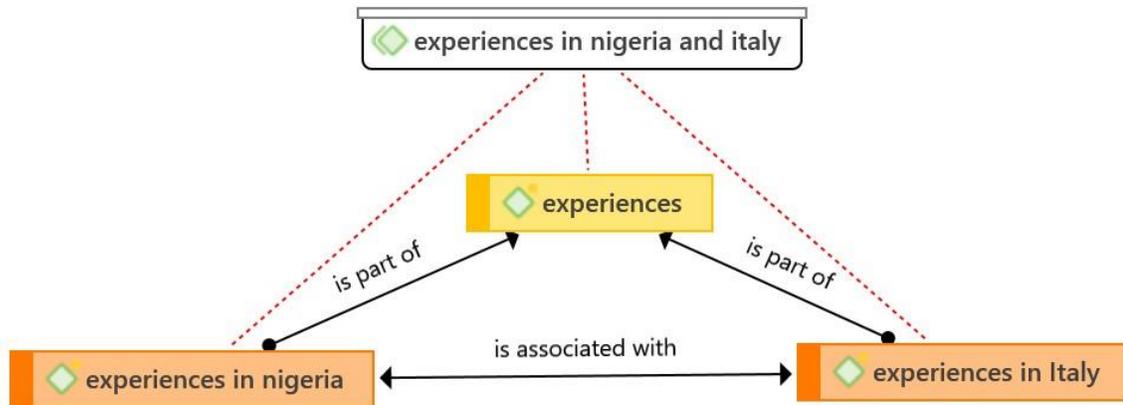
### **Indications of transformative learning processes and outcomes in Participants’ Narrations**

Emerging precursors of transformative learning from participants’ narrations include their positive and negative experiences, disorienting dilemmas, and some specific transformative processes and outcomes.

### *Cross-Cultural Experiences at the Center of Migration (and Transformation)*

Participants described various events and issues that depict their transition from Nigeria to Italy. As indicated in Figure 1, participants' migration experience cuts across events in Nigeria and Italy. The experiences include benefits of their migration and challenges they encountered.

**Figure 1.** *Cross-Cultural Experiences*



**The Positive.** Participants' narrations showed migrating from Nigeria to Italy came with lots of benefits such as having a new social network (of friends and families), Henry said, "What I learned in that journey, a little bit with some friends is that a tree can never make a forest." Jackson recounted his excitement when he joined his wife in Italy: "So, it was a little smooth excitement; we were happy!" Similarly, Ajoke was excited to join her family: "I was really excited. Number one, I've changed the environment, my family. I get to sleep, wake up with my brothers in the same house. It was really exciting for me!"

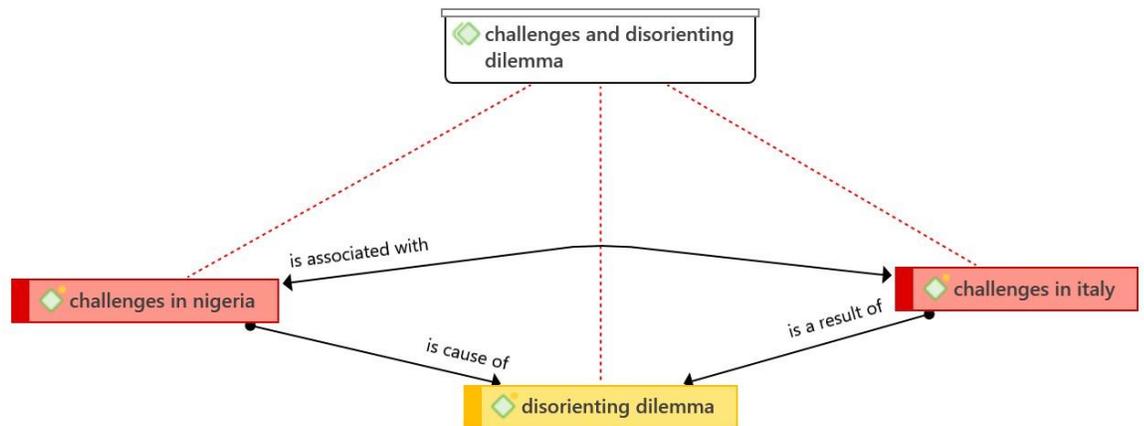
**Challenges Here and There.** Participants' experiences include the challenges they faced in Nigeria and in Italy. Challenges faced in Nigeria narrated by the participants include insecurity, a corrupt system, and the difficulty of obtaining a visa. Varied challenges faced in Italy include a language barrier, imprisonment, and the weather. "Like moving around, the language barrier, how the environment is, it's different from Lagos where I was coming from" (Ajoke). On the climatic differences, Dele added, "So you can imagine coming from a warm temperate, the weather condition like we have in Nigeria and arriving in here during the lower degrees."

### *Identifying Their Disorienting Dilemmas*

Henry mentioned a culture clash he witnessed around his workplace that led to the death of three persons, including a pregnant woman. Henry was smuggled through the desert, lived a hard life in Libya, risked his life on the sea, and was incarcerated as soon as he landed in Italy. Henry experienced extreme situations before, during, and after moving to Italy, describing them as "the survival of the fittest", "slavery in another accent", "trouble to trouble" and "prison to palace." Amaka referred to the difficulty of leaving her mother

in Nigeria and coming to live with a new family in a non-English speaking country. Dele had not completed his first university degree before he left Nigeria to reside in Italy. He expressed difficulties of emotional imbalance and lack of focus because he had to juggle the two countries for some years before he settled in Italy. Ajoke experienced uncertainties when she got to Italy to change her Schengen tourist visa to a studies visa. She faced the reality of going back to Nigeria or staying in Italy as an illegal resident. Bimpe mentioned while in the process of emigrating to Italy with her son to live with her husband she lost her sister. Bimpe said it was difficult to leave her bereaved mother, but Bimpe and her child needed the company of her husband. Jackson narrated that although he was excited to meet his wife when he got to Italy, excitement soon vanished due to financial challenges and lack of structure that could enable him to get a job with his newly obtained BSc degree. Instead, Jackson became a beggar. He was frustrated because he felt that, as a man, he had the responsibility to provide for his family. As Figure 2 shows, these disorienting dilemmas are connected to cross-cultural challenges participants narrated.

**Figure 2.** *Disorienting Dilemmas*



### ***Indications of Processes for Transformative Learning***

Selected quotations from interviews match codes named after the processes of transformative learning. Sample excerpts below suggest how participants dealt with their experiences and disorienting dilemmas to benefit from their situations.

#### **Cognitive/Rational.**

Action: “Let me go and build up my life. Let me try to do something that will give me, that will feed me later in the future. So that was why, I started doing the work I’m doing now” (Henry).

Reflection: “I was thinking about the language... I knew that that would be a challenge” (Dele). “I began to ask some questions: why my first experience in Europe is in prison?” (Henry).

### Extrarational.

Spiritual: “But you know, spiritually, when I pray, I feel relieved more, that I’m not alone in this journey” (Ajoke).

Dialogue/Support: Henry emphasised the role of communal support thus:

... Sometimes when we see ourselves in another place in a very difficult time, you see that there is love of being from one nation. ... So, there were also people that were eager to tell me what I needed to hear at that particular moment. So, we become like a family... We had to live together. We had to do that at that particular moment to survive because some people were with no money, no water, but some were with water, they didn’t have money.

### Social Critique.

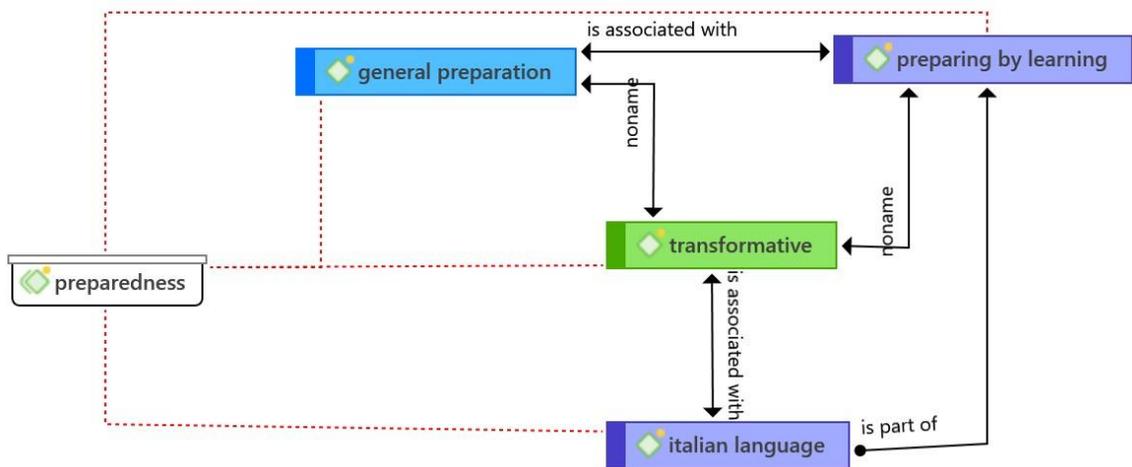
Unveiling oppression: “[In Nigeria] it’s only the rich people that have access to the police and the mobile police, the soldiers” (Henry).

Empowerment: “My calling is to share a better perspective with people if they could... I wanted to go before... And I know that people who don’t have that change of the mindset cannot also stay here” (Jackson).

### Possible Transformative Learning Outcomes

Findings showed the Nigerian immigrants’ (non)preparation for cross-cultural transition culminated in perspective transformation. As Figure 3 indicates, different aspects of participants’ cross-cultural preparedness relate to transformative learning.

**Figure 3.** Cross-Cultural Preparedness and Transformative Learning



Participants’ narrations and reflections showed instances of certain transformative learning outcomes. For example:

Acting differently: “But the prison also prepared me to know some rules and regulation, what to do and what not to do, because there are rules and regulation on how to live in outside society when you go out” (Henry).

Shift in worldview: “So, I change my values. There will be a redirection of purpose” (Dele).

Openness: “I’m now seeing the other side of what I was not seeing before” (Jackson).

Deeper self-awareness: “One of the things I also learned is that life is easier when you smile a lot” (Amaka).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Narratives and themes from interviews showed evidence of preparation (nonlearning and learning) among most participants and a trace of nonpreparation for cross-cultural transition. Participants’ preparedness was associated with their motivation to emigrate, cross-cultural experiences, and level of proficiency in the Italian language. Even though most participants demonstrated their migratory agency/capability (de Haas, 2021) in the form of migration preparedness, each participant still experienced a disorienting dilemma traceable to their unique situation and expectation. While the results confirmed migrants often become transformed after a cultural immersion (Bethel et al., 2020; Onosu, 2020; Taylor, 1994), the results also showed the experiences migrants have faced in their home/sending society are equally central to triggering of disorienting dilemmas. Individual immigrants’ disorienting dilemmas were identified, suggesting a connection to challenges participants faced across Nigeria and Italy. Also, their cross-cultural experiences pointed to different aspects of the processes and outcomes of transformative learning (Hoggan, 2016; Stuckey et al, 2013).

This paper was delimited to presenting emerging results in an on-going study. While it has indicated cross-cultural precursors of transformative learning, it has not analyzed how participating Nigerian immigrants underwent a transformative learning process. Further inquiry could show how Nigerian immigrants’ cross-cultural transition leads to various outcomes of transformative learning.

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