

MAPPING THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY ACROSS CONTINENTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT: This literature review paper aims to explore the current state of transformative learning theory in a global context by examining how scholars from different world regions understand, utilize, and develop transformative learning theory in their own contexts. Transformative learning theory has been a significant framework for investigating individuals' personal transformations (Mezirow, 1997, 2000) and promoting social transformations (Allman, 1999). Our review covers scholarship from the USA, Canada, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. The results reveal an unequal development of transformative learning theory among countries in the West and East and North and South. This paper argues that mapping the understanding of transformative learning theory in a global context could help bridge the theoretical gap between different regions, enrich our understanding of the broader meaning of transformative learning, and promote more inclusive and equitable practices in education.

Keywords: transformative learning theory, North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Middle East

Transformative learning theory (TLT) has garnered considerable attention as a framework for investigating personal and social transformations. While initially focused on individual growth, it has expanded to encompass the promotion of broader societal changes. This literature review paper explores the current state of TLT globally by examining how scholars from various regions interpret, employ, and advance the theory in their respective contexts. The review encompasses scholarship from diverse regions, including the USA, Canada, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. By mapping the understanding of TLT in a global context, this paper seeks to address the uneven development of the theory between different regions, foster a comprehensive comprehension of transformative learning, and promote inclusive and equitable educational practices.

As conceptualized by scholars like Mezirow (1997, 2000), TLT has traditionally focused on understanding individual transformations. However, it has become increasingly recognized that transformative learning also holds the potential for broader social change (Allman, 1999). This paper undertakes a literature review to examine the current state of TLT, considering perspectives from around the globe. By investigating how scholars from different regions engage with and contribute to the theory, this review aims to shed light on the varying development and utilization of transformative learning across the West and East, North and South. It seeks to bridge theoretical gaps, broaden the

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understanding of transformative learning, and foster more inclusive and equitable educational practices worldwide.

In this paper, we explore how scholars from different regions of the world conceptualize, utilize, and develop TLT in their various contexts. In the following sections, we delve into diverse perspectives on TLT across different regions, providing a comprehensive analysis of the current state of the theory in a global context. By critically examining the interpretations and applications of TLT, we aim to uncover patterns, disparities, and potential areas of convergence. Ultimately, this review seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of TLT and promote greater inclusivity and equity in educational practices worldwide.

Methodology

This paper employs a summative literature review (Hernández, 2012) approach to map the understanding and utilization of TLT in a global context. The review begins with a comprehensive literature search, encompassing scholarly articles, book chapters, and relevant publications from diverse regions, including the USA, Canada, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. The selected literature is then organized and managed using reference management software, allowing for systematic data analysis and synthesis. Through developing a coding framework, key dimensions of TLT, such as individual-to-social transformations, practical-to-critical perspectives, and global dynamics, are identified and examined across the literature. The findings are then synthesized and interpreted, providing an overview of the current state of TLT worldwide. By utilizing a summative literature review, this paper aims to bridge theoretical gaps between different regions, enrich our understanding of the broader meaning of transformative learning, and promote more inclusive and equitable practices in adult education.

Findings: Transformative Learning in a Global Context

The research findings summarized transformative learning in the the USA, Canada, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. TLT has been explored and applied in various regions worldwide. The United States strongly emphasizes individual transformations, critical reflection, and social justice, with methodological contributions encompassing qualitative approaches and the integration of diverse theoretical frameworks. In Canada, the social dimension of transformative learning is recognized, incorporating collective change, power dynamics, and decolonizing pedagogies. European scholars focus on cultural contexts, active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, and transformative pedagogies. In Asia, cultural and spiritual perspectives are integrated, addressing societal challenges through Confucian values, Buddhism, and indigenous knowledge. The Middle East examines transformative learning in the context of social and political transformations, promoting peacebuilding and democratic participation. Africa emphasizes critical consciousness, emancipatory education, and community engagement, drawing on African philosophies and post-colonial perspectives. In South America, transformative learning is applied to management education, community-based

education, and academic freedom. Transformative learning is a valuable framework for personal and social transformation, promoting critical consciousness, equity, and social justice across diverse global contexts.

Transformative Learning in the United States

Transformative learning theory (TLT) originated in the United States with the influential works of Mezirow in the 1970s (Kitchenham, 2008). Over the years, Mezirow continued to refine the theory through revisions and in response to criticism and countercriticism (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2006). Despite critiques raised by scholars such as Clark & Wilson (1991), Collard & Law (1989), Dirkx et al., Mezirow & Cranton ((2006), and others, TLT gained traction in the 1990s, and scholars like Cranton, King, and Taylor further developed it into a comprehensive adult learning theory (Cranton, 1994, 1996; 2006; 2016; King, 1997; Taylor, 1994).

In the United States, TLT has been widely applied in various research, workplace, and community contexts (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). However, there have been concerns about redundancy and the limited scope of TLT's development primarily within North America, especially the US (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Scholars have noted the need for a broader perspective that includes non-Western ways of learning and the exploration of positionality and cultural contexts (Cranton & Taylor, 2013). To address these concerns, Taylor and Cranton (2013) called for research that incorporates positivist and critical approaches, challenging the dominant reliance on interpretive research in the field of transformative learning. While transformative learning theory has its roots in the United States, it has undergone extensive development, criticism, and expansion. Its application has extended to various contexts, but there is a recognized need to diversify research approaches and consider non-Western perspectives to fully explore the transformative potential of learning experiences.

Transformative learning theory (TLT) originated in the United States and has undergone extensive development, criticism, and expansion. Mezirow's initial work laid the foundation for TLT, and subsequent scholars like Cranton, King, and Taylor further developed it into a comprehensive adult learning theory (Cranton, 1994, 1996; 2006; 2016; King, 1997; Taylor, 1994). TLT has been widely applied in various contexts within the United States, but concerns have been raised about its limited scope of development primarily within North America (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Within the field of transformative learning, scholars have categorized it into various dimensions and approaches. These include the psycho-developmental approach, depth psychology approach, planetary/ecological perspective, emotional/neurobiological approach, spiritual/transpersonal dimension, emancipatory/social critique approach, arts-based perspective, and metatheoretical approach (Mezirow, 2000; Dirkx, 1997; O'Sullivan, 2001; Taylor, 2001; Hart, 2000; Schugurensky, 2002; Lawrence, Hoggan et al., 2009; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Hoggan, 2016; Stuckey et al., 2013).

However, there are critical perspectives on the dominance of North American scholarship in transformative learning studies. Scholars like Taylor, Cranton, and Snyder have raised

concerns about redundancy and the need for broader perspectives that incorporate non-North American viewpoints and diverse approaches (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). They call for a more inclusive and diverse research approach, challenging the overreliance on interpretive research and advocating for the incorporation of positivist and critical approaches (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Taylor and Cranton (2013) called for research that incorporates positivist and critical approaches, challenging the dominant reliance on interpretive research in the field of transformative learning.

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In the USA, TLT has been widely applied in various research, workplace, and community contexts (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). However, there have been concerns about redundancy and the limited scope of TLT's development in the USA and Canada (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Scholars have noted the need for a broader perspective that includes non-Western ways of learning and the exploration of positionality and diverse cultural contexts (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). To address these concerns, Taylor and Cranton called for research incorporating positivist and critical approaches, challenging the dominant reliance on interpretive research in transformative learning.

Transformative Learning in Canada

Transformative learning in Canada encompasses a deep, structural shift in our fundamental beliefs, emotions, and actions, altering our way of existing in the world (O'Sullivan & Morrell, 2002). It encompasses various dimensions, including self-understanding, relationships with others and the environment, power dynamics, alternative approaches to living, and the pursuit of social justice, peace, and personal joy. O'Sullivan (2002) proposes three models for transformative learning: survival education, critical resistance education, and visionary transformative education. These models emphasize the development of independence, critical thinking, and creativity among students.

Building upon Gramsci's theory of hegemony and ideology, Allman (1999) explores transformative learning as a theoretical framework for social change in Canada. She views Western democratic power, referred to as hegemony, as an ideology that permeates all aspects of society. Additionally, she draws on Marx's writings on dialectics, conscience, and ideology to propose a revolutionary, transformative learning praxis. Carpenter and Mojab (2011) further critique current critical adult education by reexamining Marx's ideas and emphasizing the need to cultivate a revolutionary conscience for transformative learning in society. Hooks (1999) suggests an engaged pedagogy that acknowledges the holistic nature of individuals and seeks knowledge not only from books but also about navigating the world. Ng (2010) introduces embodied learning as a form of decolonizing pedagogy that dissolves boundaries between the self and the collective and between the individual and systemic realms. Transformative learning in Canada involves various approaches and perspectives that aim to bring about personal and societal transformation, fostering critical thinking, social change, and the integration of mind, body, and spirit.

Transformative Learning in Europe

It has been more than a decade since the first transformative conference was held in Greece, and that transformative learning has been receiving attention from European scholars (Fleming et al., 2019). Many factors have led to a decreased focus by Europeans on transformative learning. The first factor can be attributed to the fact that Europeans have adopted a different perspective on education, concentrating on social movements and advocating equity for poorly educated and socially excluded people, including workers' education, community education, and women's education (Fleming et al., 2019). So, they believe these aspects have been missed in Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning. In addition, most transformative conferences were held in the USA, and the journals were mostly written in English, which made transformative learning sources less accessible to Europeans since the advent of transformative learning (Kokkos, 2014).

However, among European countries, Greece is excluded as it has shown interest in the field of transformative learning (Kokkos, 2014). There was a time in Greece when they started their movement against dictatorship and towards emancipatory goals of education, coming from the theories of Freire (1972) and the school of Frankfurt. Greek people started welcoming transformative theory as it was rooted in Freire's (1972) theory and critical learning. In addition, Mezirow has used a wide range of references to European theories in his transformative learning, meaning he accepted the European frameworks in Adult Education. Moreover, Mezirow has shown incredible openness and flexibility regarding his theory and has changed and modified it based on some rational and logical European critiques (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 1997). These reasons are why Greek scholars have accepted the second wave of Mezirow's transformative learning. Therefore, the theoretical frameworks of transformative research in Europe were based mostly on the works of Mezirow (2000), Brookfield (2012), Cranton (2006), and Taylor (1997, 2007). Also, European papers consisted of many references from European scholars whose works were related to critical thinking and social changes within education, including

Adorno (1953), Bourdieu (1984), Foucault (1983), Giroux (1983, 1988), Horkheimer (1938), Illeris (2003, 2014), and Jarvis et al. (2003).

European works were mainly centered on theoretical approaches and research to study Mezirow's transformative learning further to connect it to their own educational goal, emancipation within education. They used the theories of Freire (1972) to critique Mezirow's works regarding not having enough social dimensions. Europeans have published some works about higher education (Illeris, 2003; Illeris, 2004; Inglis, 1997), community development (Harvey & Langdom, 2009), cultural context (Fleming, 2000), and professional development (Dominice, 2003). Notably, only one work by European scholars focused on developing transformative theory and learning it with innovative views (Alhadeff, 2003). Therefore, there is not enough work on the implications of transformational learning in different settings among Europeans. They placed their focus on theoretical research of transformative learning and had little attention to the nature, concepts, components, and applications of transformative learning. Most European works on the transformational approach are critical of Mezirow's transformational theory, saying that he underestimated the intuitive and emotional aspects of learning (Fleming, 2000; Illeris, 2003, 2004), the dimension of social change (Inglis, 1997, 1998; Taylor & Pettit, 2007), the collective view (Wilhelmson, 2006), and the impact of spirituality (Preece, 2003), and unconscious modality (Hunt, 2009).

The field of TLT in Europe has historically shown limited involvement compared to American and Canadian scholarship. European adult education scholars have been less inclined to incorporate transformative learning as a framework, instead building on European theoretical paradigms. This lack of engagement has been identified as a hindrance to the development of transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Kokkos, 2012). However, recent trends indicate a growing base of European scholars delving into TLT and offering their unique perspectives (Hoggan, 2020). European scholars are increasingly referencing European theorists such as Habermas, Jarvis, Illeris, Bourdieu, Lefebvre, Foucault, Piaget, and Honneth, in addition to the core North American theorists Mezirow, Taylor, Cranton, Brookfield, and Kegan (Fleming et al., 2019). These European scholars often emphasize critical reflection, social dimensions, and societal change within transformative learning (Kokkos, n.d.). They also explore arts-based approaches, using aesthetic experiences and artworks to facilitate perspective transformation (Kokkos, 2010, 2021).

Among European countries, the United Kingdom exhibits notable activities related to transformative learning, including postgraduate courses, research, and published works (Kokkos, n.d.). Greece has shown a marked interest in transformative learning, drawing inspiration from Mezirow's perspective and connecting it to the views of Freire and other critical thinkers (Kokkos, 2014). Italy has experienced a delayed appreciation of transformative learning due to limited translations of Mezirow's works, but it is gaining recognition within some Italian universities (Biasin, 2018). Germany has engaged in a dialogue between TLT and the German concept of *bildung*, exploring their intersections and tensions (Laros, Fuhr, & Taylor, 2017; Biasin, 2018). These emerging European perspectives offer critical insights that complement American and Canadian scholarship

on TLT. European scholars' focus on social transformation and emancipation, along with their diverse theoretical traditions rooted in humanism, socialism, and critical social traditions, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of transformative learning in a global context (Fleming et al., 2019; Jarvis et al., 2003). The engagement of European scholars in transformative learning research enriches the field and fosters an ongoing international perspective (Biasin, 2018).

Transformative Learning in the Middle East

The work of Middle Eastern scholars on transformative learning has been limited compared to the work of Americans and Europeans. The research on transformative learning focused almost entirely on applying this approach in their societies. No research was found about examining transformative theory or a critical dimension of it. Instead, the Middle East studied the application of transformative learning in different contexts. In their research, all Middle Eastern scholars have cited Mezirow's works as their main and first reference to transformational learning. So, the theoretical framework of scholars from the Middle East is rooted in Mezirow's work. In addition to Mezirow, they have also referred to other scholars such as Taylor, Cranton, Brookfield, and Giroux in their works. Most of the work of scholars from the Middle East is centered around the application of transformative learning. One study has considered transformational learning in higher education (Madsen & Cook, 2010; Nguyen, 2014), professional development (Romanowski & Al-Hassan, 2013; Hamza, 2010), cultural context (Eichler & Mizzi, 2013), adult education and women's education (Madson, 2010; Fursova, 2014), community education (Affolter, 2009), and English language learning (Safari, 2019).

Transformative Learning in Asia

TLT has been widely explored in various domains of adult education, spirituality, medicine, therapy, leadership development, and the arts in Asian contexts (Lau-Kwong, 2012). Scholars have examined the application of TLT in different contexts within Asia. For example, research conducted in Korea focused on understanding the appropriateness of using Western frameworks, particularly Jack Mezirow's TLT, in the Korean context (Kang & Cho, 2017). Studies have also explored transformative learning experiences among Chinese teachers working abroad, emphasizing the role of culture shock and intercultural encounters in shaping their perceptions (Ye & Edwards, 2018). Additionally, research in Thailand has discussed the implementation of transformative learning in graduate international programs and how it supports diversity and internationalization (Kitcharoen, 2011).

Furthermore, TLT has been linked to other disciplines and practices in Asian contexts. For instance, integrating bioenergetics and Taiji Qigong, a traditional Asian practice, has been explored to enhance wellness, learning capacity, and spiritual development (Ng, 2000; Beaupre, 2011). In the field of medicine, TLT has been applied to understand the experiences of family caregivers in Taiwan and their transformation from negative to positive caregiving (Yen, 2018). Additionally, TLT has been connected to neuroscience, leadership practices, sustainable development, and course settings, providing insights into

the transformative potential of these areas in Asian contexts (Chang et al., 2011; Indrawan & Sofjan, 2021; Beaupre, 2012). Overall, TLT has been widely explored and applied in various disciplines and contexts throughout Asia, shedding light on its relevance and effectiveness in promoting personal growth, cultural understanding, and social change in the region.

Transformative Learning in Africa

TLT is gaining recognition in Africa, with scholars seeking non-Western perspectives (Cranton & Taylor, 2013). African scholars are exploring transformative learning from diverse angles, including the Ubuntu pedagogy, which draws on the *Ubuntu* paradigm of southern Africa (Seehawer et al., 2022). The principle of Ubuntu, captured by “I am because we are,” emphasizes the relational aspects of transformative learning (Gilpin-Jackson & Welch, 2022). Scholars like Biao (2013), Keane et al. (2022), and Gwekwerere and Shumba (2021) also incorporated the concept of Ubuntu into transformative learning. Ajayi and Olatumile (2018) explored Yoruba folklores as tools for transformative learning on environmental sustainability in Nigeria, incorporating indigenous spirituality and traditions. In connection with the continent’s modern history, African scholars apply transformative learning within post-colonial contexts, particularly referencing the apartheid era in South Africa. Disruptions caused by regular disruptions in a post-apartheid South African adult learning program can catalyze learning and change (Cox & John, 2016). transformative learning is further explored in the context of historical and political challenges by Spooner and John (2020), Čubajevaitė (2015), and Keane et al. (2022). While many adopt a rational perspective of transformative learning based on Mezirow’s conception, some studies incorporate the Freirean perspective of emancipatory/social critique (Bergersen & Muleya, 2019; Čubajevaitė, 2015; Akpomuje et al., 2022).

Moreover, African scholars have conceptualized collective transformative learning (CTL) and informal transformative learning (ITL). CTL highlights the importance of collective movements and social consciousness in transformative learning (Mejiuni, 2012, 2017). ITL explores how individuals make sense of their experiences through informal learning processes, incorporating rational and irrational perspectives on transformation (Akpomuje et al., 2022). Studies in Africa also focus on transformative learning in the context of environmental sustainability, investigating its implications in African societies (Ajayi and Olatumile, 2018; Collins, 2008; Dike and Ugwuanyi, 2022; Eguavoen and Tambo, 2020). African scholars employ quantitative and mixed-method approaches in transformative learning research, providing an empirical foundation for understanding transformative learning in African contexts (Ugorji, 2022; Onuoha, 2018; Opere et al., 2020; Ajayi and Olatumile, 2018). transformative learning is being applied in high school education, extending beyond the adult learning context (Okoye, 2022; Opere et al., 2020; Ojukwu, 2016). These observations highlight the growing engagement with transformative learning in Africa and the diverse perspectives and contexts it explores. African scholars contribute valuable insights, expanding the understanding of transformative learning within the African context, both in theory and practice.

Transformative Learning in South America

Paulo Freire first popularized critical reflection and consciousness-raising in South America to counter oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 1970). Inspired by Freire's work, Jack Mezirow developed the concept of transformative learning, which entails changing problematic frames of reference to be more inclusive, open, and reflective (Mezirow, 2000). This theory emphasizes critical self-reflection, dialectical discourse, and the consideration of diverse voices (Imperial et al., 2011). Research conducted in Brazil highlights the application of transformative learning in management education, where it promotes a change in values and the development of community-based competencies (Dal Magro et al., 2020). Another study explores transformative learning experiences with marginalized individuals in Northeastern Brazil, emphasizing personal growth and transformation (Qi, 2015). Additionally, a project in Mexico's prison system, the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, examines how transformative education can lead to personal and collective transformation in the face of multifaceted oppression, shedding light on the connection between reflection, conscientization, and freedom (Strickland, 2022).

Conclusion

Transformative learning has evolved to incorporate a broader social perspective, critical engagement, global and cross-cultural dimensions, and methodological contributions from various theoretical frameworks. These dimensions highlight the dynamic nature of TLT, its potential for personal and societal transformation, and its capacity to address pressing issues of social justice and equity. Our findings have shed light on the current state of transformative learning scholarship in different regions. In the USA and Canada, transformative learning has established patterns and frameworks, but there is a recognition among scholars that the field can benefit from the contributions of scholars beyond the region. Efforts are underway to export transformative learning as a work-in-progress, acknowledging that it is a continuously evolving field. European scholars are gradually adopting transformative learning but with a cautious approach considering their Euro-cultural heritage. The relationship between the USA and Canada, and Europe in the transformative learning field is being defined and strengthened, as evident in the shared editorship of journals and the hosting of transformative learning conferences. African scholars are making significant contributions to understanding transformation as a unique form of change that transfigures from within. They emphasize incorporating indigenous perspectives and traditions in transformative learning applications, highlighting transformative learning's spiritual, communal, political, and socio-cultural dimensions in Africa. Some African scholars are expanding the use of transformative learning beyond adult settings and employing positivist approaches. While these efforts hold the potential to advance the theory, it is essential to approach them with attention and caution, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the theory.

In conclusion, the engagement with transformative learning across different regions reflects a growing global interest in transformative learning. The diverse perspectives and contexts in which transformative learning is being explored contribute to a more nuanced

understanding of transformation and provide valuable insights into the evolution of the field. Moving forward, it is crucial to continue fostering cross-cultural collaborations and dialogue to further enrich the theory and its practical applications.

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