

## **Learning to manage: Transformative outcomes of competency-based training**

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*Transformative learning theory is a dominant approach to understanding adult learning. The theory addresses the way our perspectives on the world, others and ourselves can be challenged and transformed in our ongoing efforts to make sense of the world. It is a conception of learning that does not focus on the measurable acquisition of knowledge and skills, but looks rather to the dynamics of self-questioning and upheaval as the key to adult learning. In this article, transformative learning theory is used as a lens for studying learning in a competency-based, entry-level management course. Instead of asking which knowledge and skills were developed and how effectively, the research enquired into deeper changes wrought by the learning experiences. The research found that for some learners the course contributed to significant discontent as they discovered that management practices they took to represent the norm fell dramatically short of the model promoted in the training.*

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## **Introduction**

This article presents research into a vocational education and training (VET) program which used the concepts of transformative learning theory to analyse the process and outcomes of learning. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1991) proposes that a change in an adult's 'perspective' on some part of their life and world can be regarded as a form of learning. This conception of learning contrasts with the more common understanding of learning as the acquisition of new knowledge or skills. Rather than focusing on the process by which knowledge and skills are added to a learner's stock of abilities and memories, or measuring how extensive or effective this process of addition has actually been, transformative learning theory looks at the nature of the learner's way of viewing, interrelating, valuing and anticipating experience and the dynamics of the process by which these 'meaning perspectives' can come under challenge, destabilise and transform. This research involved the study of an entry-level management course to see whether transformative learning occurred in it, and one of the questions pursued was, if transformative learning took place, how did the program contribute to the change? Thus the research was not asking about what knowledge or skills were successfully transmitted through the program, or to what standard or how efficiently, but how learners' outlooks, assumptions and expectations changed as a result of their experiences in the program. The research was concerned to identify challenges which threatened learners' worldviews and any processes of critical self-questioning that ensued, and to explore psychological upheavals that may have followed. While the research did not set out to evaluate the program or the model of competency-based training underpinning it, the experiences of the learners raises some questions about the VET context.

## **Theoretical framework**

The concepts of transformative learning that have been introduced so far—the ideas of meaning perspectives and learning as a potentially tumultuous transformation of perspectives—come from the work of Jack Mezirow, an adult education researcher and theorist who introduced his theory in the mid-1970s. Mezirow and a team of researchers investigated the learning of women who returned to education and study after a break from formal education. Using a grounded theory approach, they compared the accounts of students in a large number of re-entry programs and found that many reported experiences which followed these phases:

- a disorienting dilemma;
- self examination;
- a critical assessment of sex-role assumptions and a sense of alienation from taken-for-granted social roles and expectations;
- relating one's discontent to a current public issue;
- exploring options for new ways of living;
- building competence and self-confidence in new roles;
- planning a course of action and acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans;
- provisional efforts to try new roles; and
- a re-integration into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective. (Mezirow 1978:12)

For Mezirow (1978), this uncomfortable and sometimes painful process was symptomatic of 'meaning perspective transformation.' He (1978: 11) explained that a meaning perspective is:

... the structure of psychocultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated to past experience. It is a way of seeing yourself and your relationships. More than that, it establishes the criteria that determine what you will experience—criteria

for identifying what you will find interesting, for deciding which problems are of concern to you, for determining what you are prepared to learn and from whom, for determining values, for setting priorities for action, and for defining the meaning and direction of self-fulfillment and personal success.

Mezirow (1978) claims that learning in childhood involves the formation of these meaning perspectives, a process through which we are socialised into the values and roles of our society. By adulthood, our perspectives are well-established. However, according to Mezirow (1991), the perspectives we develop, which allow us to structure, comprehend and simplify the complexities of experience, can also serve to limit or distort the world. Although it is possible for us to live in ignorance of the flaws in our perspectives or defend our worldview in various ways, sometimes new experiences force attention on a problem with our basic assumptions and thereby expose our perspectives as limited or distorted in some way. Experiences like this may bring a 'disorienting dilemma' in their wake, triggering self-examination and critical assessment of our taken-for-granted foundation in the world. Mezirow (1978) emphasised the disturbance and upheaval that attended this process in many of the participants. Because one's assumptions, social roles and expectations are closely bound up with our identity, any challenge to these 'meaning structures' could well be disconcerting, and forming the realisation that our own assumptions are in some way limited or flawed might entail confusion and self doubt.

Mezirow's theory of adult learning has been enormously influential in the field of adult education. According to Taylor (2007), transformative learning theory has displaced Knowles' notion of andragogy as the dominant paradigm in the field. By 2009 (when the data presented in this paper were collected), a wide range of philosophical positions were represented in debates about transformative learning, including feminism (e.g. Belenky & Stanton 2000), critical theory (e.g. Wilson & Kiely 2002) and post-

structuralism (e.g. Tennant 2005). Empirical research had been undertaken in a wide range of adult learning contexts, including social movements (e.g. McDonald, Cervero & Courtenay 1999), community learning (e.g. Bennetts 2003), health (e.g. Fair 2006) and professional development (e.g. Cranton & King 2003). Management development has been another setting for this kind of research. A survey of this work reveals that transformative learning proves a useful way to comprehend the dynamics of learning and change in an environment where assumptions and perspectives can be as important for success as the possession of particular skills and knowledge (Gray 2006; Elkins 2003; Carter 2002). However, most of this research addressed senior management and themes such as coaching, leadership development and business strategy. Basic management training has not been the object of transformative learning research.

Another field that has not been the scene of extensive transformative learning research is VET, especially Australian VET. In my research, which attempted to address this gap, I sought and examined experiences of meaning perspective transformation in VET. I was interested in the kinds of challenges thrown up by a management program—in terms of both curriculum content and organisation and pedagogic practice—and how learners came to terms with these challenges. I was also interested in whether transformative experiences contributed to vocational outcomes. I found that the management program produced challenges for a number of the participants that initiated phases of the transformative process such as disorientation and self-questioning with direct consequences for their understanding of management and, for some at least, their career trajectories.

### **The management program case**

The management program was run on a part-time basis over several weeks in the training rooms of the provider. The course participants

came from a wide range of business types and nine of the ten course participants were sponsored by their employers. Eight of them agreed to participate in interviews for this research after completing a survey on the last day of their course which solicited information from participants including whether they had experienced challenges, discomfort and self-examination and if they had experimented with new roles as a result. The questionnaire was adapted from an instrument developed by King (1997) who used it over a number of studies to explore perspective transformation in the context of formal learning. The survey indicated that of the 10 respondents, six had the kinds of experiences that indicate transformative learning and of these six, five were among the eight who consented to a follow-up interview. These interviews, conducted two to three months after completing the course, followed a semi-structured format that included asking participants to reflect on some of their responses to the survey, expanding on any indications of challenge, discomfort or self-questioning, and exploring their experiences since the survey. I also interviewed trainers who facilitated the program about their approaches to training, and whether they had witnessed any signs of discomfort or self-questioning in program participants.

Seven of the eight learners who participated in the interviews disclosed that the program precipitated profound reflections about the nature of management practice and the particular practices they witnessed in their workplace. One of these learners, a newly appointed manager in a community services organisation, offered the following reflection on the challenges posed by the course:

I suppose the course really made me realise that I can only be a good manager if I have the staff on my side, so the way I see it is: the better I can motivate staff and get them to sort of pull in the direction, the easier my job as a manager will be—and that is something that wasn't really clear to me. For instance, how important it is to delegate and to develop staff, and give them

training opportunities, and all these things were not clear to me and they are clearer now.

*So what sort of approach to management did you take before the course?*

Probably much more assertive and forceful rather than cooperative and consultative—because it is not normally my style, because I prefer to ‘work along’. I absolutely dislike any kind of team work. I only do it if I absolutely have to and unfortunately in this role, managing staff is part of it and the part I really enjoy least of all. So the course really gave me some simple tools of going through the motions and managing staff in a more professional way than I would otherwise have ... I probably thought managing people is getting them to do what you want, full-stop, no matter what, whereas now I am more inclined to give individual people an opportunity to have input and steer them rather than direct them which doesn’t come naturally but it seems to work better.

This learner’s account reveals that the program confronted her with a model of management that ‘made sense’ and at the same time presented a clear contrast with her existing perceptions of sound management practice. By the time I interviewed her, she said she was becoming more adept at collaborative decision-making and fostering worker autonomy. Her account also faithfully reflects the message the trainers each insisted the course promoted. One of them articulated the kind of changes the course was designed to promote:

The mindset of a good, effective manager. They have got empathy with human beings. They understand that the only way to get results is working with people rather than pushing them. There can be lots of ‘effective’ managers who get things done, but they push people and they ruin people in the process. So a good, effective manager would be one who gets things done, but they do it through using good human relations intervention ... Another value they might have is that they can’t achieve things on their own. They are in fact dependent on workers.

Another trainer explained that a good manager is:

... someone who wants to develop their people and create a motivating environment so their people can really work effectively and want to be at work and enjoy achieving their own particular roles so that to me—mind you, it is hard to find a lot of those people—but that, to me, is what a good manager is: [someone] who is concerned as much about leading their people, setting them in a direction and helping them develop and realise their own potential, as ensuring that all the systems are in place, that the budgets have been achieved, all those what I call ‘things’.

It might be expected that the experience articulated above by one of the program participants would be typical of the challenges to participant assumptions. In other words, the message that management should be about—collaboration and worker empowerment to achieve team and organisation objectives—might be expected to pose a challenge to assumptions about management held by the learners, and that any subsequent perspective transformation would revolve around the learner coming to terms with the task of adopting a new approach to management practice. However, most of the interviewees revealed a different kind of struggle prompted by their learning. What most of the interviewees related was that, when they became aware of the implications of the model of management promoted in the program, they realised that the practice of their own managers and/or the management culture of their organisations was actually in conflict with it. The ‘disorienting dilemma’ was between the management practice in their workplaces and the model of practice they were studying in the course. ‘Self examination’ and ‘critical assessment of assumptions’ addressed not only their own ideas about management, but also their relationship to management in their organisations and their feelings of loyalty and gratitude to management for sponsoring their participation in the course (with the implication that they were thereby destined to join that particular community of practice).



One statement that captures the tenor of most of the learner interviews came from a team leader in a large construction company. He said, ‘I wish my manager was at the course... He should have done this course a long time ago’. Later, when I spoke to the course trainers, they disclosed that this kind of statement is one of the most common responses written on their course evaluation forms. I should mention that most of the interviewees were quite cautious about how they expressed their discontent. Although I had assured them that their responses would remain confidential, I nevertheless detected resistance to opening up about why they felt the course was challenging. One participant from a major financial institution was more forthcoming than most. She explained that:

The company I worked for was very, very large—3,500 employees—so there was lots of different areas in the company and I have worked in several areas of the company. The area I was working in last made me realise that there are a lot of managers out there who don’t care about the people. They just care about getting things done and that is one of the things that [were] highlighted to me by the course. Because I had worked in other areas of the company where the managers were really good, they treated their staff really well, things like that, we didn’t really think about those kinds of things, so coming up to being a manager or a supervisor or getting into team leader roles and going off and doing this course, really made me realise that I have had a lot of good managers in the past, but there is also a lot of horrible people out there who just don’t care about the people and I ended up being one of those people that suffered because of that.

This management trainee, who entered the course as a team leader, had left the organisation by the time of our interview. She told me that the course triggered her final decision, and she also drew strength from conversations with other students in the course who drew her attention to the fact that managers, particularly in some kinds of business, frequently move between organisations. This learner was in the process of settling into a team leader role in a new company and

remarked on the contrast between management practices at her old workplace and the new.

Another course participant I spoke to had left his position and was also thriving in a new organisation in a management role. This learner had come to Australia in recent years, and explained that management practices in his country of birth were 'authoritarian'. He believed that this background led him to accept management practices in the workplace of his former employer, the state headquarters of a retailer. He described the experience in the course he felt had triggered his reflections on management in his workplace:

In a session on customer service, seeing a video about how people treat each other (internal customers) in the workplace made me understand how these poor service situations arise and why it is important to change [and] combat this in the workplace.

He realised that the customer service model was something that should apply within the workplace as well as to external customers. It seems from that point on, he became more and more aware that the dominant approach to management in his workplace was at odds with the model studied in the course. He specifically concluded that management in his former workplace was limiting the potential of not only him, but the business as a whole, and he felt justified leaving the organisation as a result.

Another two students, including the one who asserted that his manager should be part of the course, were currently looking for other positions. In their cases as well, the message about management promoted in the course (as well as the networking opportunities created through contact with other students) contributed to their current course of action.

During my interviews with the trainers, I asked about their own role in 'challenging' the learners to think critically about management practices. All were clear that management trainers should *not* be

challenging their students in this way, one declaring that to do so would be 'immoral'. However, one of the trainers raised the issue of values, and explained to me that participation in the course may serve to clarify learners' values, which in turn could lead them to question the values of their organisations, particularly the values of management. As I probed him about his own role in clarifying the values of his students, he revealed that:

I still have some reservations as to how far I would go to encourage them to reflect on their own values viz-a-viz their organisation and to then assess their organisation, because again I feel that that is not my role as the facilitator ...

He added that if the opportunity arose,

... what I would certainly be doing more is working with them in almost a practical exercise of really working out—are the values formalised in their organisation? If not, let's have a go at it. Let's go back in the organisation and do *a, b, c*, - work with your Chief Executive and ask can you do this and then put into practice getting those values identified and then starting to get them to do things that demonstrate the values and practice, because there is lots of things they can do and it would evolve in the course what they are doing ... They love that approach and [to] be given that opportunity to do that. I believe that, as result of doing that, they will be challenging their organisation's values and measuring them against their own values. I just believe that is a natural thing that will come out of it and the fact that I have given a demonstration of how positive that can be—where they are aligned with the individual and where people who were prepared to share that with the organisation, so that is a real maturity practising of the values. By giving them the positive, then I am sure they can see whether that can ever be happening in an organisation or not, therefore they would be evaluating, assessing where do they go from here. But for me to be saying 'you have to really work out whether you are a round peg in a round hole'—I am just wondering if that is overstepping the mark.

*You see it as desirable that at some point a learner questions their own values in relation to the organisation, but you don't think that is your role to directly challenge?*

I would say personally that is where I am coming from. But again, I don't tell them the challenge—but they do challenge, and they share with me their challenge and I will discuss it with them... but I know where the end point usually ends up. They leave the organisation and it happens. I am very wary of that outcome because their personal challenge gets to the point where they become frustrated with their organisation and then they are in turmoil and they think the only thing they can do is leave and they do, so I am a bit worried... I seem to be a precursor to people changing their jobs because they hear about how it can work, how positive it can be with real examples that I can give them, and they can't see it happening in their own organisation and they leave. Therefore, coming back as a representative of [the training provider], I would hate to be accused by the organisations who are paying for their participants to come to setting them up to get into this turmoil and this challenge, but I know they will over time but then I can't be accused of encouraging them to do it.

## **Discussion**

This case study of a management program approached learning processes and outcomes from the point of view of transformative learning theory. The research focused on challenges, discomfort, self-reflection and role experimentation in accordance with the phases of meaning perspective transformation articulated by Mezirow (1978, 1991). What this research found was that a majority of course participants experienced one or more of the phases of transformative learning. In itself, this result may be expected in a course focused on human relationships and the dynamics of cooperation to achieve collective goals. In terms of transformative learning theory and the body of research and knowledge that has grown up around it in the past three decades, the impact of the management program on participants makes a good deal of sense. However, from the point

of view of the purposes of VET, the findings from the case study are disturbing and raise at least two important issues: the relationship between 'industry standards' and industry practice in the context of VET, and the practice of training individuals when the process can lead to a mismatch between the student's skills and knowledge and those of staff back in the workplace.

With respect to the first issue, the very interesting matter arises of the potential for a split between how an industry might wish to portray its essential competencies and associated standards, and how things actually are or can be done in the industry. Of course, critics of the competency-based approach have, from the earliest days of the training reform era in Australia, cast doubt on the extent to which a competency-based curriculum can faithfully represent competent practice in actual work roles (e.g. Stevenson 1992; Chappell, Gonczi & Hagar 2000; Buchanan et al. 2009), while advocates of the approach concede that the model is in need of further refinement (Guthrie 2010). Any split between competency standards and industry practice might simply indicate a wide diversity of practice in an occupational area. Obviously, the development and expression of competency standards is a process committed to minimising ambiguity and promoting a unified image of a practice. It follows that, if a practice area like management actually comprises a greater variety of specific practices than can be encompassed in the statement of a competency standard, then some disconnection between the standards and practice in at least some parts of the field would be expected. On the other hand, if in addition to management practice there is a distinct rhetoric about management, it may be that the process of competency standard formulation has succeeded in translating the rhetorical representation of the practice rather than the practice itself. Another possibility is that the 'split' reveals rather a limitation of the competency-based approach to curriculum itself. It may be that a competency-based approach is inherently more appropriate to rendering technical skills and knowledge than in practice areas which

involve psychologically and ethically complex work with humans. It would follow that such areas will be more difficult to codify in unambiguous terms, a difficulty that could account for either of the first two possibilities.

A cursory glance at the history of the management curriculum in Australian VET points to yet another way of interpreting the tension between competency standards and actual practice experienced by the learners. This history, which begins in the turbulent dawn of the Australian training reform era, shows that one of the very first curriculum areas to be reformed was management training. Early documents, such as the government paper, *Industry training in Australia: The need for change* (DEET 1988), were critical of industry support for learning, and suggested that management attitudes toward training contributed to the situation. A large-scale research project that followed these initial assessments issued in the 'Karpin Report', which announced that a 'new paradigm' of management was emerging in the international business environment (Karpin 1995a). As Ellerington (1998: 177) explained, the project found that:

... increasing globalisation, widespread technological innovation and pressure on business to customise products and services have created an international business environment that requires managers to have skills and characteristics radically different from those of only a decade ago. In a change from the autocrat of the past, today's manager must be a communicator, but tomorrow's manager should be a leader or 'enabler'.

The new paradigm is articulated in the Boston Consulting Group's contribution to the Karpin project (1995b). Drawing heavily on the management philosophy espoused by a wave of American business theorists (e.g. Peter Drucker), the Boston Consulting Group offered a critique of traditional management practice and profiled the 'Australian manager of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. A key feature of this practice is the 'vertical relationships' that obtain in the organisation where a few well-informed individuals direct the work of others with a

minimum of feedback. In contrast, Drucker (in Karpin 1995b: 25) argued that the contemporary business environment demanded 'knowledge-based' organisations, 'composed largely of specialists who direct and discipline their own performance through organised feedback from colleagues and customers'. In consequence, the new manager would require (among other things) teamwork and communication skills underpinned by 'a superior understanding of people', and would need to 'treat colleagues on merit', believe in the feedback process and value diversity (1995b: 51).

The Frontline Management Initiative (e.g. ANTA 1996) was a response to the Karpin Report and sought to introduce the new management paradigm into Australian working life through a set of specially developed learning resources and procedures. From the perspective of the research reported in this article, the significance of these developments is that the legacy of this attempt to change management practices persists in the current VET management curriculum, indicating that, to the extent that there are still pockets of traditional management practice in industry, learners coming from these settings will encounter an aspirational curriculum geared to promote change. Such learners may well find themselves thrust onto the horns of a dilemma as they discover that management practices back in the workplace belong to an apparently by-gone era.

The second issue—concerning the tension potentially created when training leads an individual to acquire skills and knowledge that are not consistent with those of the workplace—is related to the previous issue and can be comprehended in terms of some of the explanations canvassed in relation to it. In other words, this tension may be something one would expect if the training is attuned to standards that are not representative of the whole field of practice. Again,

if the standards that guide the training express a desired practice rather than necessarily the practice itself—a conclusion consistent with the historical legacy in current management curriculum in VET—an individual who has been initiated into those standards may experience and possibly create tensions back in the workplace. A less fraught perspective on the tension would be that, when training is concerned with an area of practice that has distinct human and social dimensions, such as management, skill and knowledge development ought to be conceived in collective terms. It may be that the holistic nature of management systems demands training at the level of groups rather than individuals. This interpretation is consistent with some recent learning theory which understands learning as a social process and the outcomes of learning as primarily relevant to practice contexts (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). However, since the costs and risks involved in group training can be prohibitive for businesses, especially smaller ones, it may not be practicable to send more than one staff member along to a management course. Also, there is anecdotal evidence—my discussions with the management trainers supplied some—that staff members may be sent to training programs as a reward for good work and/or as a signal that they are bound for greater things within the organisation. But as we have seen, such a strategy may eventually set the individual at odds with the management culture of their organisation.

## **Conclusion**

The lens of transformative learning allows us to examine the processes and outcomes of learning in a way that contrasts with approaches that focus on performances and other evidence of the acquisition and synthesis of skills and knowledge. Using this lens to research learning in a competency-based management program helped to reveal learning experiences which are not generally associated with competency-based training. The case study found that a relatively large number of students experienced a transformation of



perspective about management and their workplace. Talking to both the learners and their trainers about these effects of the program, it emerged that the triggering 'dilemma' for many of the participants was the realisation that management practices with which they were familiar—such as the practices in their current workplace—were at odds with the model of management promoted in the program. In the space of time after the course, these participants came to the decision that they could no longer work with their employers, and either planned to or did move to different employers. These 'outcomes' of the program raise questions about the relationship of competency standards to work practices. In the case of the management competency standards, it could be that history holds the key to understanding the effects of the program studied in this research. The study also raises questions about the practice of sending a single employee off to a training program, especially in the context of a role that is deeply embedded in the social life of a workplace. Further research into the implications of transformative learning in the context of competency-based management training, focused perhaps on curriculum content and the specifics of management practices in the learners' workplace, would be necessary to resolve these questions. However, there can be no doubt that Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning provides an illuminating framework for exploring at least some areas of competency-based VET.

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