International Education as Transformative Learning

John M. Dirkx, Ph.D.
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education
Michigan State University, U.S.A.
Two brief stories – Represent a different kind of learning

_Thomas_
Younger, undergraduate student, not married, majoring in agricultural economics

_Hannah_
Mid-level manager of IT in university, doctoral student, married, mother of three young children
This learning:

• Goes beyond memorization of information

• Engages and develops deeper cognitive and affective structures of the learner

• Changes the way learners view themselves and the world
A brief historical overview of transformative learning

- Paulo Freire’s work in the 1960s and 1970s with cultural literacy circles in South America

- Studies in the 1970s by Jack Mezirow in the U.S.A. of women returning to community colleges

- Using developmental theory in 1980s and 1990s to broaden scope of the theory – primarily North America

- In 1990s and 2000s theory becomes increasingly holistic and more widespread – Europe & Africa
What makes the idea of transformative learning so relevant and important to international education?

- Changing socio-cultural contexts for higher education around the world
- Changing nature of the teacher-learner relationship
Changing socio-cultural contexts for learning

• Effects of globalization on teaching and learning – Increasingly diverse learning environments

• Emphasis on “high impact learning” – Like education abroad

• Importance of 21st century skills – Integrating work-related learning into the curriculum
Changing nature of the teacher – learner relationship

• Paradigm shift in teaching and learning – From teaching to learning

• More emphasis on experiential, collaborative, active, and engaged learning

• Shift from surface to deep learning – Increasing emphasis on learning as making meaning rather than just receiving it
These changes:

• Challenge our existing frames of reference – the beliefs and assumptions we hold about ourselves, others and the world

• Often evoke potentially powerful feelings and emotions within the learning experience
Transformative learning helps students:

- Identify and critically reflect on beliefs, values, and assumptions in international education that are problematic

- Constructively engage and work through powerful emotion-laden experiences that can arise in international education
What transformative learning theory seeks to understand

“... how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers.”

(Mezirow, 2012, p. 76)
What is transformative learning?

. . . . the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic world views and specific capacities of the self:

How is it facilitated?

. . . . through consciously directed processes such as appreciatively accessing and receiving symbolic content of the unconscious and critically analyzing underlying premises.

Dean Elias, 1997
This definition points to two important processes that are going on in transformative learning:

- Expanding or enlarging our conscious awareness of our world and how we see it

- Increasing our abilities as persons or selves to engage in and adapt to an increasingly diverse culture and environment
That is, learning that is transformative reflects:

• A fundamental shift in our meaning perspective or frame of reference

• An expansion of consciousness
This learning occurs through two processes

• Critical reflection on our assumptions, beliefs and values related to what we are trying to learn

• Imaginative engagement of emotion-laden experiences and images that arise within the learning experience
Role of critical reflection in transformative learning

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

Whalley, 1996
“... what students describe as ‘life-transforming’ is, at root, the experience of seeing themselves, their culture and values, in some new way, perceived through the lens - that is, feedback, of the host culture”

Selby, 2008
Revisit Thomas’ story and experience in international education
Transformative learning as imaginative engagement or “soul work”

- Focus here is on meaning of emotion-laden experiences in learning
- Meaning-making is more unconscious, imaginative, and extrarational
From the perspective of soul work:

“Transformative learning involves making sense of . . . outward expressions of our inner selves”

Dirkx, 2012

• Dreams and fantasies

• Emotion-laden experiences

• Powerful images that arise within one’s consciousness
Intended outcomes of soul work

• Developing or enhancing a dialogue between one’s ego consciousness and the unconscious

• Becoming more conscious of what was previously hidden or unconscious within our selves
Self-knowledge as the goal of transformative learning

• Differentiation of our multiple inner realities

• Learning to dialog and development relationships with our inner realities

• Gradual transition from a more ego-based sense of self to a more transcendent or communal sense of Self

• Increasingly authentic relationships with the “other”
Revisit Hannah’s story and experiences in international education
Key ideas to a transformative approach to international education

• International experiences can disrupt our ways of making sense of our selves, others, and the world around us

• These experiences often evoke powerful emotions, affect, and images

• Working through these experiences involves critical reflection and imaginative engagement

• Outcomes of transformative learning include transformed meaning perspectives that are more open, inclusive, discerning, reflective and emotionally capable of change
Implications for learning in international education

- Learning as primarily instrumental
  - adding to existing meaning perspectives and frames of reference
  - Little or no dialogue with one’s unconscious selves

- Learning as primarily transformative
  - creating new or fundamentally changing existing meaning perspectives
  - establishing ongoing dialogue with one’s unconscious selves
Relationship of transformative learning to the BEVI

. . . We have to beyond, far beyond, the veneer of rationality which . . . is an illusion in any case . . . We must go on a journey deep into the human mind and heart – and blaze a new path . . .

Charles Hopkins, 2016

From the forward to Making Sense of Beliefs and Values: Theory, Research and Practice
Beliefs and values are at the very heart of why we humans do what we do – and who we say we are – to ourselves, others, and the world at large. [It is vitally important that we understand] the complex interactions (e.g., among affect, cognition, context, culture, and development) that culminate in a unique constellation of beliefs and values for every human being. . .

Shealy, 2016