

# International Education as Transformative Learning

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# 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

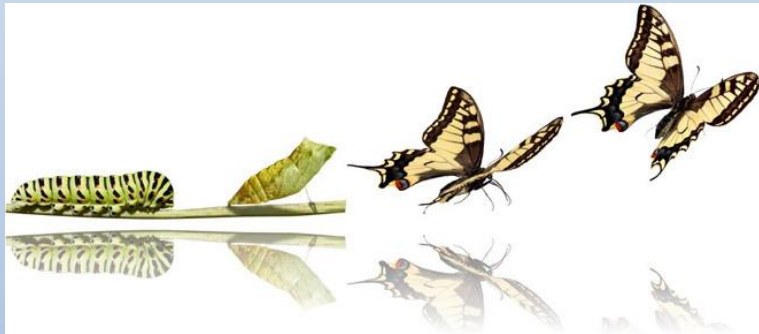
# This learning:

- 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 underling 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 go 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