

GOING DEEPER—TEXT-BASED LEARNING

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING



Mezirow (1978) first defined **transformative learning** as “changes in the ways a person knows.” Drago-Severson (2009) defined transformative learning as a “qualitative shift in ways in which a person interprets, organizes, understands and makes sense of his or her experience” (p. 4). Transformative learning has a strong relationship to self-directed learning, autonomy, and critical thinking, the very qualities we would hope for in educators and students.

According to Mezirow, transformative learning can be stimulated by a disorienting event, followed by self-examination, and ultimately a reorientation to the new perspectives. One author recalls a personal transformative learning experience provided by Richard Suchman, the developer of Inquiry Training. He invited each person in the group to select a rock from a large collection. While he lectured, participants were invited to get to know the rock. We held it, turned it over in our hand, held it against our cheek, maybe tasted it, or assessed its weight and surface. Then all the rocks went back in a bucket. Later in the session we were asked to reach in to the bucket and find our rock again, but only by feel. To our amazement we were all unerringly successful. Next, we were instructed “to teach” our rock to another person. Like robots mesmerized by years of schooling, we found ourselves *describing* our rocks rather than letting our colleague experience it the way we had. With our unconscious assumptions about teaching shattered, we explored the meanings of this experience.

The current complexities of designing effective instruction for students with experiences foreign to us provide rich opportunities for collective transformational learning. Drago-Severson (2009) distinguishes between transformative learning, which helps adults better manage the complexities of life, and informational learning, which increases what we know. As we learned from the example above, informational learning, alone, is insufficient to navigate the challenges of adapting instructional practices. Learners need to have some degree of control over the learning, which allows for the synthesis and transformation of information that supports deeper learning. This complex goal does not occur without systems of support and challenge that respect the adult developmental level at which an individual is operating. As stated previously, this helps the learner find a secure starting place, but then the expectation needs to shift to self-authoring. Leaders support and challenge learners at their developmental levels through mentoring, coaching, instructional conversations, and providing leadership opportunities.

Drago-Severson suggests that transformational learning involves letting go of our own perspectives and embracing dramatically opposing alternatives—just as we did in the rock activity. Self-examination follows along with being open to other approaches and values and being open to diverse ways to explore problems.

Transformational learning requires amplifying mental, emotional, and interpersonal capacities. As the rock experience revealed, transformational learning is a “qualitative shift in ways in which a person interprets, organizes, understands and makes sense of his or her experience” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 12). When adults recognize how these shifts relate to changes in the ways they understand their world, and signal movement from one developmental stage of adult learning to the next, they begin to self-report. Some have self-reported these transformations after sustained

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engagement in actionable learning endeavors or by keeping journals and identifying and challenging the assumptions of the self and group that contribute to transformational learning.

So too, we propose, can leadership strategies expand and enlarge the thinking of staff, policy-makers, and even the community. The authors of this book attribute our sustained movement toward ever more complex and comprehensive ways of knowing to being stimulated by our collective work at the origins of Cognitive Coaching and Adaptive Schools, as described in the introduction. We believe this is also possible for members of school teams—not necessarily in a year, or even two, but with ongoing environmental support and thinking tools, and after prolonged and rich engagements of constructing with others.