



Title	A Review of Transformative Learning Theory and Its Implications for Intercultural Learning
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Citation	大阪大学高等教育研究. 2025, 14, p. 15-24
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/102849
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A Review of Transformative Learning Theory and Its Implications for Intercultural Learning

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This paper reviews Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and its practical applications in higher education, building on earlier review work (Enkhtur & Yamamoto, 2017), and discusses practical applications in higher education, particularly within the Japanese context. Initially formulated by Jack Mezirow in 1978, TLT emphasizes critical reflection, dialogue, and active participation to induce deep changes in learners' perspectives. Given Japan's current higher education challenges, such as declining demographics and conflicting pressures from global and local priorities, TLT offers innovative pedagogy for intercultural collaborative learning beneficial for building multicultural campus environment. The paper reviews theoretical frameworks underpinning TLT, synthesizes international and local scholarly insights, and presents a structured pedagogical approach tailored to Japanese contexts. Highlighting interdisciplinary, intercultural, and reflective practices, this model aims to foster ethically grounded, socially responsive graduates.

Keywords : Intercultural Collaborative Learning, Transformative Learning Theory, Higher Education, Japan

1. Introduction

Universities worldwide are being pulled in two directions at once. On the one hand, accelerating technological change, widening social inequities, and the urgency of meeting the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demand graduates who can work reflexively across cultures and disciplines. On the other, shrinking public budgets and demographic decline press institutions to chase market-oriented indicators such as international enrolments, English-medium instruction (EMI) offerings, and global rankings. Japanese higher education institutions epitomize this tension. With its college-age population projected to fall to under 70% of its 2018 level by 2040, successive government schemes—from Global 30 and Go Global Japan to the Top Global University (TGU) Project—have cast internationalisation as a national growth strategy

designed to cultivate *global jinzai* (global human resources) and attract high-skill talent (Hofmeyr, 2021; Yonezawa, 2020).

A decade of government projects, however, reveals a stubborn gap between policy rhetoric and everyday learning. Disciplinary silos persist; many EMI courses rely on literal translation rather than research-based pedagogy; and domestic and international cohorts often occupy the same campus yet lead parallel lives (Poole et al., 2020; Hofmeyr, 2021). For example, only about 10% of Japanese undergraduates experience study abroad, leaving the vast majority without a deep immersion in intercultural experiences (Enkhtur et al., 2021). Three key bottlenecks help explain this impasse: first, top-down funding still rewards headcounts such as TOEIC scores over deep intercultural learning; second, rigid faculty structures and exam-centered pedagogies impede the development of interdisciplinary, community-engaged curricula; and

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third, the dominance of English as the default language reinforces linguistic hierarchies, leaving international students struggling to engage with Japanese-medium instruction (Hofmeyr, 2021; Enkhtur et al., 2021).

Intercultural learning research points to a more effective alternative. A recent scoping review of 967 studies shows that student outcomes improve markedly when institutions (a) embed intercultural aims holistically throughout curricula and support services, (b) design inclusive spaces for meaningful connection, and (c) scaffold reflective practices that link global issues to local identities and future careers (Mittelman et al., 2024). Yet such principles remain patchily realised in Japan, where internationalisation continues to be measured largely in numerical targets and brochure-friendly joint degrees (Hofmeyr, 2021). Transformative Learning Theory (TLT)—first articulated by Mezirow (1978) and refined over four decades—offers a robust framework for bridging this gap. By guiding learners through disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, dialogue, and action, TLT aligns closely with the intercultural learning literature’s call for purposeful, reflective, and inclusive pedagogy, while providing a concrete pathway to move beyond transactional models of “global human resource” production toward ethically grounded, socially responsive graduates.

In previous work, Enkhtur & Yamamoto (2017) provided an initial overview of TLT within higher education contexts, highlighting core theoretical elements. The present review extends that analysis by synthesizing additional international and local insights and introducing a structured pedagogical model aimed at promoting intercultural collaborative learning. In other words, this paper aims to shift the conversation from merely counting how many students cross borders to understanding how deeply all students, wherever they study, learn to question assumptions, embrace plurality, and act for the common good.

2. Transformative Learning Theory: A Review

TLT, originating from adult education scholarship, offers a framework for understanding how individuals critically examine and alter deeply-held assumptions that shape their interpretations of the world. Jack Mezirow, a leading theorist in adult learning, defines transformative learning as the “process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Frames of reference comprise deeply ingrained assumptions, expectations, and beliefs developed through cultural assimilation, education, and interactions with primary caregivers. These frames shape how individuals perceive and interpret their experiences, selectively influencing cognition, emotions, and behavior (Mezirow, 1997).

Mezirow’s seminal research on adult women returning to education identified a specific form of learning he termed “perspective transformation,” in which learners undergo dramatic shifts in their meaning perspectives triggered by encountering a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991). This transformative experience typically unfolds through ten sequential yet recursive phases (Table 1), beginning with an initial disorienting event and proceeding through self-examination, critical assessment of personal assumptions, exploration and adoption of new roles, acquisition of skills, and eventually, reintegration of a transformed perspective (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1997).

Although commonly depicted linearly, Mezirow emphasized the recursive and iterative nature of these phases, highlighting that learners often cycle back and forth among different stages in the transformative process.

Central to Mezirow’s cognitive-rational model of transformative learning is the concept of critical reflection, which he delineates into three nested types: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. Content reflection involves clarifying beliefs without questioning underlying assumptions; process reflection evaluates the methods and strategies behind one’s beliefs; and premise reflection critically examines the foundational

Table 1. Ten phases of Transformative Learning

Phase	Description
1	Disorienting dilemma – a life event or new information that jars existing assumptions.
2	Self examination with feelings of guilt, fear, anger, or shame.
3	Critical assessment of assumptions regarding self and world.
4	Recognition that one's discontent is shared; emergence of communal meaning.
5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, or actions.
6	Planning a course of action.
7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing plans.
8	Provisional trying of new roles.
9	Building competence and self confidence in those roles.
10	Reintegration into life with a transformed perspective.

assumptions underpinning an individual's worldview (Mezirow, 1991; Kreber, 2005). Empirical research demonstrates that while content and process reflection occur regularly, premise reflection is far less common and typically requires explicit instructional scaffolding and support (Kreber, 2005).

Mezirow (1997) further outlines transformative learning as deeply communicative, involving discourse aimed at reaching mutual understanding through critical reflection of assumptions underlying intentions, values, and beliefs. Communicative learning, distinct from instrumental learning (focused on practical problem-solving and empirical testing), requires learners to engage in open, reflective dialogue to justify and validate beliefs and meanings collaboratively. Through discourse, learners critically assess evidence and arguments from multiple perspectives, working toward tentative best judgments that guide their actions (Mezirow, 1997).

In addition to Mezirow's cognitive-rational approach, scholars have expanded TLT through alternative theoretical lenses. The extrarational or holistic perspective emphasizes emotional, spiritual, and imaginal dimensions of transformative learning, viewing personal transformation as integrating unconscious insights through storytelling, metaphors, and artistic expression (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 1998). Meanwhile, the social critique or emancipatory perspective, influenced by Freirean critical pedagogy, positions transformative learning as central to social change, focusing on collective consciousness-raising about societal inequities and inspiring learners

toward communal action and social reform (Brookfield & Holst, 2010; Freire, 1970).

Across these diverse theoretical angles (summarized in Table 3), scholars agree on key elements fundamental to transformative learning: experiencing a disorienting dilemma, engaging in critical reflection, participating in reflective dialogue, and taking informed action. However, effective transformative learning does not simply arise spontaneously; rather, it requires conducive educational environments. Daloz (2000) identifies four essential conditions to facilitate transformative learning: diversity within the learning environment, opportunities for reflective discourse, accessible mentorship, and practical avenues for action. Similarly, Kasworm and Bowles (2012) highlight intentional reflective practices, supportive learning communities, collaborative projects, and the thoughtful integration of creative media and emotional dimensions as crucial to successful transformative pedagogy.

Mezirow (1997) underscores that fostering transformative learning involves creating educational settings that are learner-centered, participatory, interactive, and deeply reflective. Instructional strategies such as critical incidents, metaphor analysis, life histories, role-playing, group projects, and social action initiatives have all been identified as effective for encouraging learners to critically examine assumptions and engage collaboratively in discourse. Transformative educators play facilitative roles, modeling critical reflection, encouraging peer collaboration, and progressively transferring

leadership and responsibility to learners themselves (Mezirow, 1997).

Ultimately, TLT provides a compelling rationale for redesigning curricula and pedagogy in higher education, particularly in contexts like Japan, where traditional, examination-driven educational structures have often limited opportunities for deep reflection, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding. By cultivating learners' ability to critically examine assumptions, embrace diverse perspectives, and act autonomously and ethically, transformative learning not only reshapes individual perspectives but also equips graduates to address complex societal challenges effectively.

Research conducted in Japan has extended the reach of TLT into various domains of education and professional development. For instance, recent work on design thinking pedagogy in a hybrid higher sustainability education course illustrates that digital and face-to-face methods can introduce disorienting dilemmas and scaffold reflective practices leading to transformative experiences (Taimur et al., 2022). In this study, even amid constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the employment of digital multimedia—such as UN-produced documentaries and interactive quizzes—helped Japanese university students critically engage with global sustainability issues and challenge their ingrained assumptions (Taimur et al., 2022).

In a parallel stream, scholars exploring social innovation through the lens of transformative learning have emphasized the social impact of these shifts in perspective. Yee, Raijmakers, and Ichikawa (2019) argue that transformative learning is not

merely about individual cognitive change; it offers a route toward social value creation by reorienting participants' assumptions about their role in society and inspiring new forms of social engagement. Their findings highlight that in contexts ranging from design to urban social innovation initiatives, transformative learning catalyzes a reconceptualization of how learning and social change are interwoven. This perspective has particular relevance in Japan, where traditional educational practices are being re-examined in favor of models that promote transformative, socially responsive outcomes.

Moreover, the transformative potential of professional development programs in Japan has gained attention in teacher education research. Tomura et al. (2024) investigated Japanese elementary school teachers' experiences during online professional development focused on enhancing parental involvement—especially regarding immigrant parents in physical education. Their study revealed that through problem-based learning strategies and reflective discourse, teachers confronted previously held assumptions about cross-cultural communication, leading to significant shifts in their professional practices. The reported experiences underscore that when properly scaffolded, even digital professional development environments can foster transformative learning that bridges cultural divides—a critical issue in increasingly diverse Japanese classrooms.

Table 2. Theoretical angles of transformative learning

Theoretical angle	Philosophical Roots	Processes
Cognitive Rational (Mezirow, 1991)	German critical theory (Habermas); Deweyan pragmatism	Critical reflection on content, process, and premises; rational discourse; evidence based argument
Extrarational / Holistic Boyd & Myers (1988), Dirkx (1998)	Jungian depth psychology; humanistic & imaginal education; mythopoetic tradition	Engagement with emotion, intuition, symbol, and spirit; integration of unconscious insights through story, metaphor, arts, ritual
Social Critique / Emancipatory	Freirean critical pedagogy; Marxist humanism; feminist & post colonial theory	Problematicization of power/ideology; dialogue that surfaces oppression; collective praxis for social change

3. Application in Higher Education

Building upon the theoretical foundations and critical insights detailed earlier, including the initial work by Enkhtur & Yamamoto (2017), this section explores how TLT can be applied practically within higher education. Global applications of TLT in higher education span a wide spectrum—from study abroad initiatives and intercultural training programs to courses addressing sustainability, social justice, and language education. For example, transformative learning approaches have been integrated in diverse settings where experiential methods such as process drama and design thinking pedagogies support students in rethinking their assumptions and developing new perspectives (Murray et al., 2021; Taimur et al., 2022). These experiences are designed to extend learning beyond traditional content acquisition and cultivate skills such as adaptive expertise and intercultural empathy.

An influential model in the field is presented by the Lancet Commission on health-professional education, which distinguishes three successive levels of learning—informative, formative, and transformative—with transformative learning positioned at the apex (Frenk et al., 2010) as summarised in Table 3.

Informative learning, common in traditional educational models, emphasizes lecture-based delivery and rote memorization, effective in disciplinary grounding but insufficient for preparing graduates to handle ambiguity, complex societal challenges, or interdisciplinary collaboration. While

necessary for disciplinary grounding, this level leaves graduates ill-equipped to navigate ambiguity or interdisciplinary challenges. *Formative learning* advanced educational practices by introducing problem- and project-based methodologies that enable students to internalize professional standards and technical competencies. Here students internalise professional values and technical standards, becoming competent *professionals*. Yet they often remain locked in disciplinary silos—an issue acutely noted in Japan’s rigid faculty structures. *Transformative learning*, representing the apex of the Lancet hierarchy, redirects educational focus toward developing adaptive expertise, intercultural empathy, critical reflection, and leadership capabilities. This transformative approach prioritizes competency-driven curricula and active, creative co-design of learning experiences with stakeholders, positioning graduates as enlightened change agents adept at addressing complex, “wicked” problems such as depopulation, climate resilience, and social inclusion (Frenk et al., 2010).

Murray et al. (2021) documented how language teachers in Japanese higher education, through the practice of process drama, experienced shifts in their pedagogical approach that fostered reflective dialogue and enabled them to reframe their instructional practices. Similarly, design thinking pedagogy has been successfully implemented in a hybrid sustainability course at a Japanese university, where students were tasked to frame and solve “wicked” problems such as depopulation and climate resilience. This approach not only produced tangible learning

Table 3. Level of Learning, Objectives, Learning Modules, and Outcome

Level of Learning	Objectives	Learning Modules	Outcome
Informative	Acquiring knowledge and skills	Fact memorization, Teacher-centered learning	Experts
Formative	Professional values, technical and ethical standards	Project-based learning, Problem-based instruction	Professionals in silos
Transformative	Leadership Attributes	Competency-driven, creative adaptation of global resources to address local priorities	Enlightened change agents

outcomes but also ignited transformative experiences marked by disorienting dilemmas and iterative reflective processes (Taimur et al., 2022).

Practical Strategies to Foster Transformative Learning in Universities

Implementing transformative learning requires intentional instructional design and a supportive learning environment. Drawing on Kasworm and Bowles (2012) and supported by recent practices in sustainability, intercultural education, and language pedagogy, several key strategies emerge:

Cultivating Reflective Practices: Educators can integrate reflective logs, personal journals, and guided questioning into courses, as exemplified by diversity courses where reflective journaling has led to measurable perspective shifts among students (Remington-Doucette, 2017). Role-plays and simulations also serve as effective catalysts for deep reflection.

Facilitating Collaborative Dialogues: Small group discussions and peer feedback sessions have been shown to help students negotiate their assumptions and engage in meaningful dialogue. Process drama sessions, as described by Murray et al. (2021), are one such example where collaborative dialogue fosters transformative experiences.

Creating Supportive Learning Environments: The establishment of safe, trusting classroom environments is critical for transformation. Studies in hybrid sustainability courses indicate that structured mentorship and digital learning platforms can provide the support necessary for sustained reflective dialogue (Taimur et al., 2022).

Using Arts and Cultural Media: Incorporating visual arts, film, and storytelling can elicit emotional responses and facilitate deeper exploration of cultural assumptions. For instance, narrative-based assignments in diversity courses have enabled students to confront and revise long-held biases (Doucet et al., 2013).

Addressing Emotional, Spiritual, and Cultural Dimensions: Holistic approaches that include mindfulness practices and culturally responsive teaching enhance both cognitive and affective aspects

of learning. Such strategies are particularly valuable in settings where traditional norms may otherwise inhibit open, critical reflection (Frenk et al., 2010).

These strategies collectively contribute to a holistic pedagogy that prepares graduates to think autonomously and act as enlightened change agents. The next section introduces a conceptual model that operationalizes these strategies within the Japanese higher education context, thereby guiding future research and curriculum development in this emerging area.

Applying transformative learning for intercultural collaborative learning

Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings (Mezirow, 1991, 1997; Kasworm & Bowles, 2012) and previous syntheses (Enkhtur & Yamamoto, 2017), this subsection presents a structured, generalized model designed to operationalize TLT in higher education, fostering intercultural collaborative learning. The model, illustrated in Figure 1, outlines structured stages designed to guide learners systematically through critical reflection, meaningful intercultural dialogue, and actionable planning. Although presented here in generalized form, the model encapsulates key insights and practices relevant to addressing the educational challenges faced by universities aiming to cultivate intercultural competence and socially responsive graduates across disciplines.

Stage 1: Establishing a Safe Learning Space

In the initial stage, emphasis is placed on creating psychological safety and mutual respect among participants, essential for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997; Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). This foundational stage includes structured icebreaking activities, introductory dialogues, and the establishing clear community norms. Activities such as sharing personal motivations, setting mutual expectations, and active listening are intentionally structured to foster trust and respectful interactions among culturally diverse students.

Stage 2: Introducing Key Concepts and Provoking Critical Reflection

Once a safe environment is established, key

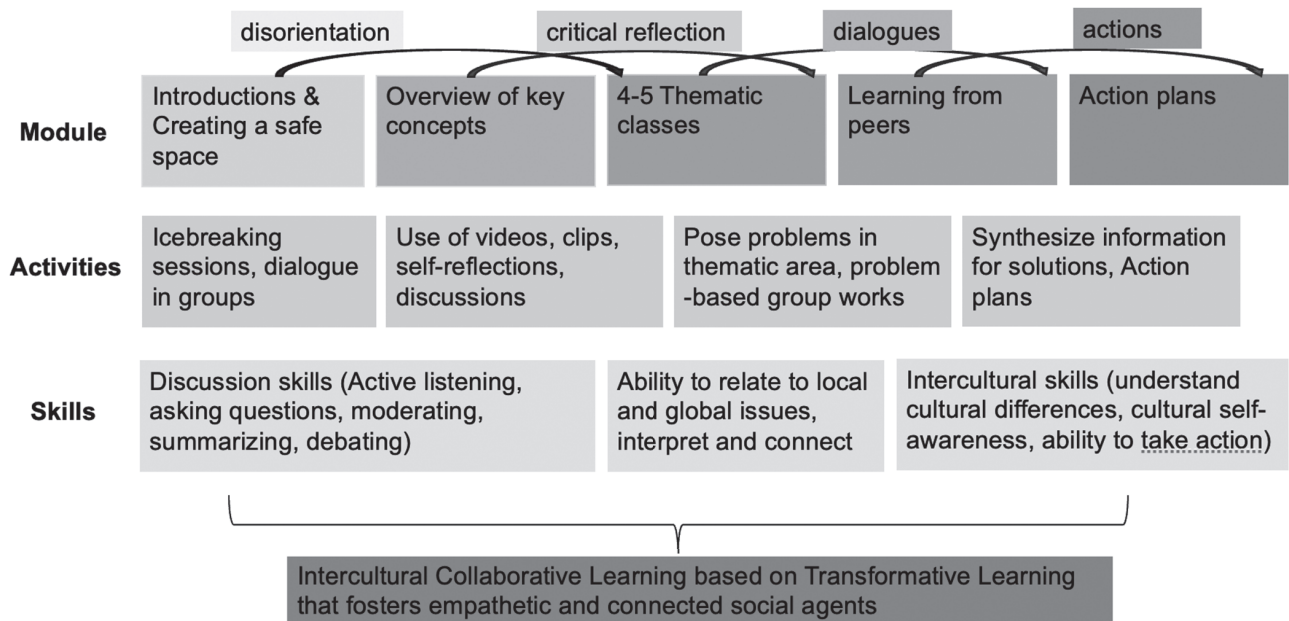


Figure 1. Intercultural collaborative learning model based on transformative learning theory

transformative learning concepts are introduced, accompanied by carefully selected multimedia materials or interactive content (e.g. Mezirow, 1991; Taimur et al., 2022) designed to create “disorienting dilemmas.” These might include short documentaries, intentionally provocative content such as Gapminder quizzes on global SDGs issues, highlighting misconceptions about global challenges, sustainability, ethical controversies in artificial intelligence, biomedical advancements, social inequality, unconscious biases, or other diverse perspectives closely related to students’ personal experiences. These resources are effectively utilized to trigger initial critical reflection, prompting learners to question existing assumptions.

Stage 3: Thematic Exploration and Structured Ongoing Reflection

Building upon initial reflections, this stage involves thematic exploration of significant global and intercultural issues, such as social justice, sustainable infrastructure, renewable energy, climate change. Each thematic module integrates problem-based group tasks, reflective journaling, and facilitated group discussions (e.g. Kreber, 2005; Daloz, 2000), providing structured opportunities for deeper and ongoing reflection. Learners connect these thematic content to their disciplinary or professional contexts,

personal experiences, continuously expanding their reflective capacity and interdisciplinary understanding.

Stage 4: Peer Learning and Intercultural Dialogue

The fourth stage centers on peer learning and structured intercultural dialogue (e.g. Mezirow, 2003; Murray et al., 2021). Sessions feature presentations by peers actively engaged in relevant advocacy or initiatives, providing relatable, inspiring models. Learners articulate and exchange their evolving viewpoints in structured small-group dialogues, thus enhancing intercultural understanding, active listening, and improved communication skills—key component of transformative learning.

Stage 5: Action Planning and Synthesis

In the final stage, students synthesize their learning reflective and dialogic experiences into actionable plans addressing real-world challenges (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Frenk et al., 2010). Participants collaboratively develop detailed strategies with clear, practical steps, creating bridges between theoretical insights and practical implementation. The resulting action plans encourage students to enact positive changes within their campus and broader communities.

Across all stages, the model prioritizes the development of key intercultural skills, critical

reflection, and communicative competencies, including active listening, questioning, moderating discussions, summarizing, and respectful debating. Students progressively develop abilities to connect local and global contexts meaningfully and act responsively in culturally diverse environments.

Outcome: Cultivating Intercultural Collaborative Learning

The ultimate goal of this transformative learning model is the cultivation of intercultural collaborative learning environments, fostering empathy, active agency, ethical awareness, and social responsiveness among students. Learners complete the educational experience equipped with heightened awareness of global issues and concrete skills necessary for effective interdisciplinary collaboration and constructive engagement across diverse cultural and professional contexts. Students may need further opportunities to refine their learning and achieve the perspective transformation by taking actions—through additional coursework or experiential activities, such as study abroad programs, community outreach, and volunteer work. As Mezirow (1991) emphasizes, perspective transformation is not a linear process. Students will inevitably encounter new challenges as they advance in their education or in engage in practical actions. To support them during this processes, universities must consistently provide safe and inclusive environment for reflection, dialogue, and peer engagement throughout students' academic journeys.

Discussion

This paper reviewed TLT and explored its practical applications within higher education, particularly in cultivating intercultural collaborative learning across diverse disciplinary contexts. It expands the earlier work by Enkhtur & Yamamoto (2017) synthesizing recent literature and proposing a structured pedagogical model.

The transformative learning literature identifies essential elements, such as psychological safety, critical reflection, interdisciplinary exploration, peer dialogue, and action planning (Mezirow, 1991, 1997,

2003; Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Kreber, 2005; Daloz, 2000). Empirical research highlights multimedia resources and interactive activities as effective in stimulating critical reflection by creating “disorienting dilemmas,” crucial for transformative learning experiences (Taimur et al., 2022).

Interdisciplinary, problem-based learning methods can significantly enhance learners' understanding of complex global issues and facilitate connections to personal and professional contexts (Mezirow, 1991). Additionally, structured peer interactions and intercultural dialogues have proven highly effective in reflective capacities, contributing meaningfully to intercultural competency development (Mezirow, 2003; Murray et al., 2021).

However, implementing transformative learning in higher education settings presents several challenges. Assessing transformative outcomes—such as intercultural empathy, ethical reasoning, and adaptive expertise—remains complex, demanding innovative qualitative and mixed-methods approaches (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Mittelmeier et al., 2024). Furthermore, cultural tendencies toward conformity or risk aversion can restrict learners' willingness to engage in potentially unsettling reflective processes, a challenge particularly pronounced in contexts such as Japan (Poole et al., 2020; Hofmeyr, 2021). Effectively adapting transformative learning practices to hybrid or digital learning environments requires ongoing research into pedagogical strategies suitable for digital contexts (Taimur et al., 2022; Tomura et al., 2024).

To address these challenges, future research should employ longitudinal studies to better understand sustained transformative impacts. Exploration of culturally and disciplinary-specific adaptations would further enhance the relevance and efficacy of transformative learning frameworks across diverse educational contexts. Expanding research into digital approaches capable of supporting transformative learning experiences can extend the accessibility and applicability of these pedagogical approaches across varied educational settings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper underscores transformative learning's considerable potential for reshaping higher education, highlighting its capacity to effectively foster intercultural competence, critical reflection, and active social engagement. The proposed structured model offers a practical and flexible framework, capable of addressing contemporary educational challenges through thoughtfully designed transformative experiences. By intentionally embedding culturally sensitive methods, ethical awareness, and practical action planning, transformative learning represents a compelling educational paradigm for preparing graduates capable of addressing complex global and local challenges with empathy, insight, and collaborative effectiveness. Through ongoing research, innovative pedagogical practice, and committed institutional support, transformative learning can significantly contribute to the broader goal of developing socially responsive and globally engaged citizens.

受付 2025.4.14 / 受理 2025.7.25

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