Transformative Learning and Critical Thinking in Japanese Higher Education

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1. Introduction

Transformative learning is conceptualized as learning involving a fundamental change in frames of reference (which include relatively fixed assumptions and expectations) that essentially transforms otherwise unexamined ideas, knowledge, and practices to make them more critically reflective (Mezirow, 1978; 1991; 2000; 2006). These frames of reference might involve such things as ideologies, attitudes, moral-ethical beliefs, cultural understandings, aesthetic values and so forth (Mezirow, 2006). Such transformative learning is routinely associated with learning that occurs in non-formal settings, however there have been growing attempts to introduce elements of transformational learning in formal and institutional settings. In universities throughout the world, the necessity of education that is intended to transform students and communities and to inspire innovation is now widely promoted as an institutional endeavor.

However, in Japanese higher education, there have been more modest attempts to introduce transformative learning and put it into practice. Here we suggest that one method by which transformative learning can be promoted for wider adoption in Japanese higher education is through the continued provision of courses and programs related to critical thinking. The challenge is to transform educational approaches across all disciplines to entice academics and students to think more critically. While there have been a number of critiques of the socio-cultural aspects of Japanese primary and secondary education arguing that students may develop impoverished autonomy of individual identity and that they lack critical thinking skills by the time they enter higher education, here we attempt to briefly shed light on different aspects of transformative learning and its implications for Japanese higher education and clarify the importance of adopting transformative approaches and introducing critical thinking to educational pedagogy.

We will first begin with a brief review and critique of transformative learning and then move to a consideration of how transformative learning conceptualizations regarding 'reflection' may have resonance with aspects of contemporary understandings of critical thinking. Following this, we will then consider how transformative learning and critical thinking may have purchase (or not) in Japanese higher education contexts, and provide some brief examples of how formal courses could

incorporate elements of critical thinking as a proxy for transformative learning. We conclude with some consideration of the opportunities (and challenges) for transformational learning adoption presented by the drive towards internationalization of higher education in Japan.

2. Transformative Learning Theory

The American sociologist and leading thinker in adult education Jack Mezirow first formulated transformative learning theory in the 1970's, and the theory has subsequently evolved over the following decades "into a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience" (Cranton, 1994, p. 22). His theory builds upon the work of critical theorists such as Jurgen Habermas (on domains of learning) and Paolo Freire (on conscientization), in addition to drawing on the idea of paradigms by Thomas Kuhn (see Kitchenham, 2008 for detailed review). General elements of the theory also have considerable resonance with Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' (in this sense habitus is related to habits of the mind). Individuals socialize by inhabiting different fields such as family or institutions like universities where students belong to a community by certain fields of study. The field does not always determine the beliefs and behavior of the individuals; rather, the process is two-way. As all fields are social constructs which inspire changes in the students' assumptions, if students change the field is also likely to change (Christie, 2009).

Mezirow (1978) first applied the concept of transformative learning to a study of re-entry programs for women who were continuing their postsecondary studies in community colleges in the United States, or were considering employment after an extended hiatus. Founded upon qualitative methods and grounded theory, the study sought to investigate factors affecting the students` progress in order to assess and improve the program quality. Based on the results, it was found that these women had experienced significant transformations in their perspectives and ways of being. Mezirow suggested that the transformative process occurs based on the following phases (See Table 1). Although the steps happen in various orders, all ten stages must be fulfilled to experience change of perspective and transformative learning.

Table 1. Mezirow's (1978) Ten Phases of Transformative Learning

Phase 1	A disorienting dilemma
Phase 2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
Phase 3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions

Phase 4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
Phase 5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
Phase 6	Planning of a course of action
Phase 7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
Phase 8	Provisional trying of new roles
Phase 9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Phase 10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

These transformations are not to be regarded as simply individual transformations (i.e., self-beliefs or perceptions) they are embedded within complex and dynamic social systems and are evident both to the participant and to others.

Mezirow continued to adopt his thinking and model of perspective transformation in response to development in other fields, and he characterized his theory as a process involving "a structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships" and a cognitive recognition that challenges the previous beliefs (Mezirow, 1978, p. 100). As previously indicated, Mezirow's early theory of transformative learning was considerably influenced by the work (indeed incorporated key concepts) of theorists focused on investigations on a range of primarily epistemic concerns, including Freire, Kuhn, and Habermas (Kitchenham, 2008). Many key issues and concepts that were developed by these theorists that contributed to Mezirow's transformative learning theory include the concepts of disorienting dilemmas, frame of reference, meaning perspectives and schemes, perspective transformation, habits of mind and critical self-reflection (Kitchenham, 2008).

According to Clark (1993) the theory of transformative learning should be understood as a model for transforming problematic frames of reference into new and more dependable frames of reference. It is a process of adult learning that produces more far-reaching changes in the learner compared to other kinds of learning, especially learning experiences that shape the learner and produce a significant impact, or perspective transformation, that affects the learner's future experiences. Transformative learning is an abstract and idealized theory grounded in the nature of human communication, which is uniquely based on adults' learning and how they change their interpretation of the world. It considers learning as partly a developmental process that involves

"using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). It is important to note that this represents a constructivist description of learning in which the learners' interpretation and reinterpretation of their sense experience is regarded as central to making meaning and hence learning (Mezirow, 1991). From this perspective, practices involving reflective dialogue, critical self-reflection and reflective action lead to transformative learning. It involves transformational processes in which fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) are critically assessed, new assumptions are made, their validity is tested and they are integrated into new perspectives and ways of acting.

2.1. Meaning Perspectives

A major component of the theory is the concept of meaning structures comprised of meaning perspectives and meaning schemes, with the process of meaning making shaped and circumscribed by these meaning structures. Meaning perspectives can be understood as comprising broad predispositions in terms of sociolinguistic, psychological, and epistemic domains that constrain understandings to fit within psychocultural assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). Meaning schemes comprise more specific knowledge relating to an individual's beliefs and values concerning their own experiences, and these meaning schemes combine to make up a particular meaning perspective. Individuals change their frames of reference or meaning perspectives by critically reflecting on their psychocultural assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that lead to fresh ways of defining their worlds. When someone experiences such a change, they have essentially transformed their view of themselves or of the world or of the nature of their interactions and relationships with others and their environment. These transformations can be seen as a kind of perceptual filter that may organize how individual experiences are consolidated into meaning perspectives.

This process is presented as being fundamentally rational and analytical and has three dimensions: psychological, convictional, and behavioral. The first two involve essentially 'inner' processes, with the psychological dimension involving changes in self-understanding and the convictional involving revision of personal belief systems, while the third could be conceptualized as involving both self and others with behavioral changes in lifestyle (Clark, 1991). Patricia Cranton, another leading figure in the field of transformative education, provides an 'elegantly simple' definition which refers to how people change their interpretation of their experiences and their interactions with the world: "An individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world" (Cranton, 2002, pp. 63-71). Further, Elias (1997) suggests that a learner's consciousness

is expanded through the transformation of both a previously held basic worldview and an understanding of specific capacities of the self. This is undertaken with directed processes such as "appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of the unconscious and critically analyzing underlying premises" (Elias, 1997, p. 3) which facilitate this transformation.

In accord with later epistemological elaboration provided by Mezirow (2006) and a detailed empirical review by Snyder (2008), we would stress the importance of a concern for discourse and discursive practices in any consideration of transformative learning, with our focus directed less toward cognitivist approaches to modelling transformations of schema (i.e., as mental, cognitive processes) and more towards explorations of how discursive practices are developed, elaborated, and performed. As Snyder suggests, learners validate meaning perspectives through discourse, and as such, the role of discourse and discursive practices is likely to be highly consequential in the development and implementation of formal teaching that hopes to engender transformative learning goals (Snyder, 2008). For example, consider that transformative learning is often a painful process (Mezirow, 1991), rooted in the way human beings communicate, and is not exclusively related to significant life events of the learner (Mezirow, 1997). It is through a combination of critical self-reflection and dialogical engagement that a student is able to make shifts in his/her worldview, which produces a more inclusive world-view. For Mezirow one of the goals of transformational learning is to develop more autonomous and reflective individuals, which is a condition for adulthood (Mezirow, 1997) and an essential element of democratic citizenship (Mezirow, 2006).

2.2 Different Kinds of Learning

Habermas (1984) draws a distinction between two basic kinds of learning which constitute the foundation of transformative learning: instrumental and communicative learning (Mezirow, 1997). Instrumental learning strives to control and manipulate the environment and focuses on learning through task-oriented problem solving and assessment of truth claims. Communicative learning seeks to understand what someone means and how individuals communicate their feelings, needs and intentions. In instrumental learning, the truth of an assertion may be established through hypothetical-deductive logic. However, communicative learning involves understanding purposes, values, qualifications, beliefs, and feelings and is less amenable to empirical tests. Communicative learning is positioned here as transformative learning in that it requires learners to be engaged in self-reflection and critical reflection of the assumptions underlying intentions, values, beliefs, and feelings. Communicative learning involves discourse between at least two persons striving to reach an understanding of the meaning of an interpretation or the justification for a belief. Ideally, communicative learning involves reaching a consensus (Mezirow, 1997).

Habermas (1984) suggests that learning can be instrumental (learning to control others or the environment); impressionistic (learning to enhance one's impression on others, to present

oneself); normative (learning of behaviors or values); communicative (learning to understand what other mean when they are communicating) and emancipatory. In addition to the two basic kinds of learning, Merizow also proposed that there are four ways of learning in terms of schemes of meaning. These involve the learning of new meaning schemes, the elaboration or refining of pre-existing meaning schemes, the transformation of meaning schemes, and the transformation of meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991).

3. Critiques of Transformative Learning Theory

There has been a variety of critical responses to Mezirow's theory of transformative learning have emerged over the years (e.g., Boyd and Myers, 1988; Cranton, 1994; Taylor, 1998) arguing that the concept of transformative learning is too narrow, too cognitively oriented and overly dependent on rational critical reflection at the expense of the role of feelings and emotions. While the theory is situated within the Habermas' critical learning theory and emancipatory framework, nevertheless transformative learning focuses on personal transformation rather than social transformation. Early critique by Boyd and Myers (1998) focused on how transformative learning overlooks transformation through the unconscious processes of developing thoughts and actions. They suggest that Mezirow does not address the role of affective and nonconscious learning – it is hard to manage emotions in learners especially where there is critical awareness and change. They conclude that reflection alone does not result in transformative learning. A number of studies have revealed that transformation of perspectives occurred in an unconscious level without a critical reflection. This line of inquiry, critical of Mezirow's over-reliance on rationality, has led to several studies that have explored the role of affective factors relating to alternate (i.e., non-rational) ways of knowing in transformative learning. They investigated intuition (Brooks, 1989), affective learning (Scott, 1991; Clark, 1991; Sveinunggaard, 1993), the guiding force of feelings (Hunter, 1980; Taylor, 1994), aesthetic experience (e.g., Kokkos, 2010; Raikou, 2016), and so-called 'whole person learning' (The Group for Collaborative Inquiry, 1994).

In one recent study, Sveinunggaard (1993) explored the role of affective learning in transformation and concluded that participants were not able to act on cognitive learning until they had engaged in learning how to identify, explore, validate, and express feelings (p. 278). In addition to the lack of recognition of emotions and feelings in relationship to critical reflection, other studies have found that some participants , who experienced a transformation in their perspectives, responded to the initiating disorienting dilemma with little or no questioning of their values and assumptions (Hunter, 1980, Taylor, 1994). Moreover, transformation does not always result in positive or transformative outcomes and is cognitively demanding for most adults. Mezirow later acknowledged that empathy, intuition, relationships, and other forms of learning are

important as well. The political dimension of transformative learning may require greater attention as the examination of power and hegemonic assumptions is integral to critical reflection. There are also ethical questions raised concerning asking students to examine their beliefs and assumptions and the strategies applied to cause these transformations.

Another critique of transformative learning is that the 'ten steps' do not account for long-term or cyclical processes of learning, and that the theory devotes insufficient attention towards ideology and political power that may be due to Mezirow's adaptation of Habermas' critical learning theory and emancipatory learning in a highly selective way that disregards political and social action (Brookfield, 2000). Perhaps a more strident critique has been presented by Newman (2012), who argues that the very concept of transformative learning is untenable – that it simply does not exist as a single type of learning. In defense of this claim, Newman argues that while transformative learning is presented as something that might take place in limited, or exceptional circumstances, it is nevertheless routinely cited as having taken place in the literatures on transformational learning. In addition, Newman suggests that the plethora of terms now associated with epistemic practices (e.g., frames of reference, meaning perspectives, habits of mind) in transformational learning represents a dilemma for any cogent theoretical application of transformational learning theory. Essentially, Newman rejects transformational learning as being essentially 'all things to all people' (2012, p. 49) and suggests an alternative conceptualization, that of 'good learning' (and details a number of aspects of such learning).

Perhaps such critique has not gone unnoticed as there appears to have been some recent disquiet from within the field of transformative learning and education that the diverse approaches to transformative learning might present a conceptual and theoretical dilution that may undermine the coherence of any unified approaches. For example, in a recent editorial in perhaps the flagship journal in the field (*Journal of Transformative Education*) Cranton (2016) raises a number of critical questions relating to the distinction between transformative learning and transformative education. Cranton makes the point that transformative learning is something that can be fostered, as one of any number of outcomes, of a formal program of institutional learning. However, it is important to consider that transformative learning describes a *theory* of learning and that most so-called transformative learning takes place in *non-formal* contexts. This presents challenges for those wishing to undertake programs that are explicitly designed to foster transformative learning in that both the doing of, and measurement of, any such learning is likely to be problematic given the previously identified constraints. Nonetheless, as highlighted in the subsequent editorial of the same journal, Dirkx (2006) suggests that, in the context of rapid globalization and recent socio-economic upheavals experienced around the world, transformative approaches should be encouraged in order to engender "the virtues of tolerance, dialogue, free speech, open-mindedness, and inclusion" (p. 175).

4. Critical Thinking

Here we would like to return to a consideration of the important role of 'reflection' in transformative learning discourse and to consider how this may have relevance to conceptualizations regarding so-called 'critical thinking'. Two basic capabilities that are taken to be important to transformative learning (Mezirow, 2006) are critical self-reflection and reflective judgment (King & Kitchener, 1994), with meaning structures understood and developed through reflective practices. According to Mezirow, in broad terms reflection involves both "understanding the nature of reasons and their methods, logic, and justification" (2006, p. 61) and "a critique of assumptions to determine whether the belief, often acquired through cultural assimilation in childhood, remains functional for us as adults" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 23). In this regard, one could consider reflection as involving various skills and abilities associated with problem solving that may take place independently or in-group interactions (Mezirow, 2006). In other words, critical reflection is a process of rational assessment of assumptions which is invoked by an awareness that something is wrong with the result of our thought, or challenging the validity of our beliefs through reflective dialogue and discourse with others of different attitudes to arrive at the best-informed judgment (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46). Cranton articulates this as "the means by which we work through beliefs and assumptions, assessing their validity in the light of new experiences or knowledge, considering their sources, and examining underlying premises" (Cranton, 2002, p. 65).

In this regard, we find some resonance with broad conceptualizations of 'critical thinking', a term commonly used to collect together a diverse range of concepts usually framed in terms of cognitive and perceptual skills (i.e., thinking, remembering, perceiving), and occasionally practices (e.g., Szenes, Tilakaratna & Maton, 2015) that are often considered to be essential for adult learners – in particular, adult learners in higher education settings. As Ennis (2015) has outlined the term came to rapid prominence during the 1970s and 1980s (particularly in the United States and United Kingdom) and might be understood in both academic and everyday contexts as being "reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 32). While Ennis has provided a detailed taxonomy that incorporates both a number of dispositions (12) and abilities (18), for our purposes we approach critical thinking as having (at least) two major components: the ability to create skills for processing information in order to construct a belief system based on that information, and an ability for acquiring skills and habits to change and guide behavior. Like transformative learning, it emphasizes the importance of developing deep understandings with regards to knowledge and skills in a particular domain, which aims at continuous use or internalization of them rather than rote learning and retention of information. Transformative learning and critical thinking can be conceptualized as self-directed processes and can be taught

along with the skills that lead to transformation in thought processes. Practice and rehearsal are key elements. In some respects, advocates of both transformation learning and the teaching of critical thinking skills may find themselves moving from educational to psychological theory, as they recommend self-discipline in thinking, to arrive at rational, objective, fair-minded conclusions. Both could be seen as involving concerted attempts to assist students to think critically and attempt to live rationally, reasonably, and empathically. Their objective is to transform the students' perspectives, or the way they think, not just what they can remember, as learning is prompted when learners critically reflect on a problem.

5. Transformation in Japanese Higher Education?

Despite the conflicting and diverse views on transformative learning and critical thinking theories, the practical utility of transformative approaches to adult education in higher learning contexts globally has been supported by empirical studies (e.g., Snyder, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Many of the empirical studies that explored transformative learning and critical reflection concur with Mezirow on at least one crucial level, that critical reflection is important to transformative learning. The literature demonstrates the importance of fostering a process of critical reflection with certain key elements (Mezirow, 1991; Sokol & Cranton, 1998). According to Mezirow, transformative learning encourages adults to become autonomous learners and think independently. It enables learners to independently make meaning of the world free from intentions, values, judgments, beliefs, and feelings that are imposed from our religions, cultures, family beliefs, personalities, and life experiences. If one accepts the argument that autonomous thinking is crucial for full participation in a democratic society as well as for moral decision-making (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7), then it follows that an important goal of higher education is to produce autonomous thinkers.

In the context of adult education and learning, transformative learning has been articulated by Mezirow as "a dramatic fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (p. 318) primarily from a cognitive learning process. It helps the educator, through developing a genuine relationship with her students, to make a difference in their lives and feel a difference in her own life as well (Cranton, 2006, p. 8). It allows adult learners to construct and reconstruct personal meaning in the contexts of their formal learning experiences (Dirkx, 2006, p. 24). Adult learners inevitably aim to work after graduation or during their studies and thus learning needs of the workforce necessitate the importance of enhancing autonomous learning (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). For taking the leadership and accepting the social and personal roles, it is thus important to develop this self-authorship in order to have a productive citizenship in a diverse society.

In Japan, transformative learning appears to have an unappreciable impact within higher education settings – particularly if we discount opportunistic or accidental transformational learning opportunities arising with international student exchange programs and 'cultural exchange' initiatives (e.g., that often involve language exchange) that might afford students' limited opportunities to experience different cultural perspectives. This is perhaps surprising given the concerted demands from the government and business that the transformation of the university sector in Japan is essential to meet perceived challenges associated with globalized competition. The role of transformative learning and critical reflection is gaining more attention in educational debates due to the importance of educating more competent human resources and professionals who possess better critical thinking and independent judgement skills. Although intercultural education and studying abroad are opportunities that may well enhance transformative learning experiences, there has been a long-argued critique that Japanese students in particular might face difficulties due to lack of critical reasoning skills (e.g., Davies, 2000; Felix & Lawson, 1994). In one highly critical assessment, McVeigh has suggested that Japanese students "are not well trained in writing critically, arguing coherently, or expressing their views with conviction or verve… they have trouble with specific forms of knowledge manipulation and production that some people, with different schooling experiences, might take for granted" (2002, p. 13). In this sense, cultural exchange alone in the absence of critical reasoning skills (i.e., a grounding in critical thinking) is not likely to engender transformative experiences or reflections.

However the question remains; can transformative learning theory be put into practice in Japanese education settings? A transformative approach to learning necessitates critical reflection in terms of content, process and premise in the educational curriculum. Students must be encouraged to think critically and change their established ways of thinking or behaving. Given also that transformative learning places critical emphasis on having learners experience disorienting or unsettling situations, so that learners can critically reappraise or assess their ways of knowing, how might this be afforded to learners in institutional and cultural settings that are highly risk aversive (e.g., Aspinall, 2012) such as Japan? When one considers the political discourses produced by government ministries in Japan on education, one can observe some apparent discord between a desire for "vigorous Japanese people who think and act on their own initiative" while simultaneously criticizing "the tendency of society to overemphasize individual freedom and rights" and stressing the need to "socialize" young people into possessing a "respect for rules" (MEXT, 2005, 1)

5.1 Example of Approach

As one example of how transformative learning might be afforded from within a Japanese higher education setting, under the guise of a course of study that promoted 'critical thinking', the

second author designed and implemented an undergraduate degree level course (Peace and Conflict Studies II) at Osaka University in which students participated in a semester long simulation of a hypothetical (but realistic) international conflict. The aim of the simulation was for students to engage in conflict resolution, notwithstanding that they may have little experience in managing or mediating intergroup (or for that matter interpersonal) conflicts. The simulation was a heavily modified version of the simulation-game developed by Ebner, Efron and Munin (2014). Students were assigned roles at the start of the semester, as ministerial representatives of two countries or as United Nations mediators. During the course of the simulation, students were given briefing notes, emails, and other materials outside of the scheduled lecture sessions (which were conducted as mediation session between the conflict parties) which required them to interact via email and SNS in order to establish negotiating positions, review policy briefs, engage in dissemination of intelligence reports and so forth.

The simulation was conducted with an eye towards creating intergroup and interpersonal conflict scenarios and situations that might afford for participants to experience the stages of transformative learning (Table 1). In particular, by challenging students with an initial, albeit artificial, disorienting dilemma involving conflict and the assignment of various simulation roles that might be relevant outside of the formally schedule class sessions. During scheduled sessions students would experience actual conflict interactions (involving both rational and affective conflict issues) and be challenged by their peers with minimal intervention from an instructor. Periodically, debrief sessions were held to provide students with opportunities to critically reflect on their attempts to manage conflict and to provide them with instructional support. While this course was not assessed explicitly for student experience of transformational learning, we would argue that approaches such as these do attend to exploring opportunities for transformative experiences within the tight constraints of a Japanese higher education setting, and might represent just one method by which transformative learning may be afforded to student participants. In the example here, students self-reported having experienced conformity to group norms, engaging in non-productive conflict within groups, and having previous beliefs and opinions challenged by the ongoing efforts to resolve key conflict issues as they emerged. Being challenged by the simulation demanded students to actively identify and attempt to overcome problems with minimal instructor guidance, many participants reported having an increased confidence that they could engage in productive collaboration in future conflict settings (e.g., workplace, institutional, personal settings).

5.2 Future challenges

According to Cranton (1994) differences in learning contexts, learners, and teachers all affect the experiences of transformative learning. Based on research on cultural dimensions, Japan is classified as a medium to high power distance culture, which implies that teachers usually hold

an authoritative role in the classroom (Hofstede, 1997). Baumgartner (2001) also argues that the dynamics and the balance of power in the classroom must be considered since a trusting and caring relationship between students and teachers is essential to encourage interpretations of facts and critical reflection. Students who see the instructor as an authority figure not to be challenged may have difficulty or reluctance to be critical of conventional values and beliefs which makes the transformational approaches less effective. An education system that tends to integrate students more to fit into the society and existing belief system might provide little encouragement for transformation and producing critical citizens. There are also ethical implications for putting students in situations to go through emotionally challenging experiences, as it should be clear who benefits from the transformation.

Nonetheless, despite the challenges that educators might face moving from an education which encourages an overreliance on non-reflective (i.e., declarative) thought and group conformity to one which emphasizes critical thinking, approaches that incorporate aspects of transformational approaches in general may be essential given the growing requirement that Japan adapt to globalizing 'megatrends' in higher education (Ng, Nakano & Fox, 2016). For example, Japanese universities should direct education delivery toward approaches that contribute to fostering of analytical and context-related skills in students. Teaching approaches that focus on elements relating to the processes of learning, rather than the accumulation of knowledge, are more likely to develop graduates with capabilities to improvise, adapt, innovate, and be creative. Improving skills such as team working, problem solving, interdisciplinary and holistic thinking could be a focus of curricula design across a range of disciplines.

In universities foreign language and ESL courses are good platforms to begin transformative education and improve learners' critical skills. Foster (1997) suggests that the risk-taking (and the resulting questioning of self) that is associated with second language learning provides a fertile ground for reflection and transformation. She suggests that self-concept is fragile in second language settings, a disparity existing between how learners perceive themselves to be and how they perform their identities in the classroom. In a setting in which one's view of self and identity is so challenged by being exposed to different cultures and ways of being, a transformation of perspectives and fostering of a more inclusive worldview may easily occur. This may also be relevant in environments in which the distinction between 'learners' and 'teachers' might be subverted – for example in settings that might provide disorientation for teachers providing instruction in unfamiliar cultures (e.g., Christie, Carey, Robertson & Grainger, 2015). Furthermore, online courses could be also beneficial for discourse and facilitating transformative learning. According to Mezirow (1991), rational discourse with another constitutes an important part of transformation, and moderated online environments may provide a safe zone for students to freely express themselves and comment without being interrupted by others (Meyers, 2008). Garrison

and Anderson (2003) presented a model for building "communities of practice" online to enable independent thinking and collaborative learning through e-learning which was aimed at improving higher-order cognitive skills to foster transformative learning.

To sum up, and as Kegan (2000) has highlighted, the role of educators of adult students is not to merely ask them to take on new skills but to alter their perception of themselves, their world, and the relationship between the two. Hence, universities and faculty members might find it effective to develop authentic, meaningful, and genuine relationships with their students (Cranton, 2006) and to work towards learner empowerment and the creation of more participatory learning environments that promote self-directed learning and group problem-solving where students learn from one another by becoming aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions (Mezirow, 1997). Education must aim at helping students to develop more awareness of their feelings and engage their emotions while learning. The classroom norms should be established toward encouraging students to accept order, justice, and civility together with respect and responsibility for collaborative learning and helping each other (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). An ideal education applies classroom practices that assist learners in the development of critical reflection.

6. Conclusion

The importance of adopting transformative approaches and fostering critical learning in Japanese higher education is important for preparing students to join the workforce. While Japanese corporations may have placed considerably more importance on such things as club participation over academic studies when making hiring determinations in the past, companies are now starting actively look for graduates who think critically and give their opinions openly (Gattig, 2012). However, it may well be the case that given the slow pace of reform in the Japanese higher education sector, efforts to improve graduate outcomes with regard to critical thinking abilities and related domains may prove to be problematic. Akira Miyahara has recently argued that Japanese educational systems still only encourage informational learning, notwithstanding the importance of a variety of approaches to learning such as transformational learning to enhance communicative skills (2012).

In this regard, consider also the growing ubiquity of information technology and the increasingly interconnected global nature of much routine social interaction. While the delivery of higher education in global contexts was once the domain of institutions that had the resources and facilities to manage the facilitation of exchange of physical entities (e.g., foreign students, foreign faculty, books and apparatus), there has been a dramatic and growing rise in institutional facilitation of virtual (or distributed) entities (e.g., through the use of massively open online courses, collaborative online international learning, and other related endeavors). Perhaps the

online, distributed nature of a growing proportion of formal education delivery may present opportunities for promoting discourses of transformative learning approaches, in that local institutional constraints on individual learners in terms of well-established meaning perspectives may be overcome through greater interactions (albeit in a virtual, online form) with other learners from diverse cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

As one example, there have been initiatives at a number of Japanese universities to explore the possibility of utilizing collaborative, online platforms to deliver higher education to more diverse student groups. Given the growing pressures in Japan to develop and promote higher education programs that feature 'internationalization' as a key component, this perhaps comes as no surprise. We would argue that alongside the inexorable increase in globalizing influences impacting on Japanese higher education (e.g., Ng, Nakano & Fox, 2016) it is important to develop the possibilities and qualities of transformative learning in Japanese education context further which necessitates the need for the concept and theory of transformative learning to be updated in accordance with contemporary requirements of the Japanese society and education system. Consider that a transformative approach to education aims to change the thinking habits of students and foster "a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actions" (Morrell & O'Connor, 2002, p. 16). Critical and autonomous thinking must take precedence over the uncritical assimilation of knowledge, with transformative learning providing a route to the development of critical thinking.

In this sense, perhaps any move towards internationalizing higher education in Japan requires the incorporation of an explicit commitment to at least some aspects of transformative learning and the development of curricula involving critical thinking elements. We should be cautious, however, in assuming that internationalization can take place simply as the inevitable outcome of offering courses (or entire programs) taught in English or having greater numbers of international students interacting with local Japanese students. What we are arguing for is that, at the very least, something akin to an orientation, sensibility, or awareness of transformative learning – be that as an explicit model or set of practices – might be an important component of any viable internationalization strategy for Japanese higher education.

We would argue that academics working within Japanese higher education institutions should attempt to provide opportunities, no matter how limited or constrained, for students to experience transformations in their thinking – consciously and explicitly. This may afford for opportunities to raise students' awareness of the limits of their perspectives and perceptions, so that they can adjust their thinking to adopt more expansive understandings relating to the putative content of any particular course or program of instruction and act based on their own interpretations rather than the beliefs and feelings of others. Whether this is undertaken as part of a program of disciplinary reorganization (i.e., focus on changing systems) or as a part of self-understanding in relation to the

world (i.e., focus on individual learner experience), efforts to afford for transformational learning may go some way to making a positive contribution towards the internationalization of Japanese higher education.

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Transformative Learning and Critical Thinking in Japanese Higher Education

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Abstract

While transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) appears to have little uptake in Japanese higher education, we argue that a focus on 'critical thinking' (as taught as a component of formal courses or as the focus of a course of learning itself) may provide a means by which the more challenging aspects of transformative learning might receive greater attention. Given that transformational learning may be difficult to engender in formal educational contexts, and particularly so in Japan, we suggest that a connection between the 'critical reflection' of transformative learning can be made with aspects of critical thinking as it is often presented in formal teaching contexts. Moreover, we argue this may be afforded by the growing institutional commitments to the internationalization of higher education in Japan that often incorporate the delivery of critical thinking courses and the promotion of discourses that trade heavily on the importance of critical thinking for graduates. We provide a brief review and critique of transformational learning, consider the linkages between transformative learning and critical thinking with a particular focus critical reflection, and provide some brief consideration of how aspects of transformational learning can be incorporated pragmatically in Japanese higher education contexts.

Key words: transformative learning, higher education, critical thinking, internationalization, critical pedagogy