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## Transformative Learning Theory and its Application in Higher Education Settings: A Review Paper

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## Transformative Learning Theory and its Application in Higher Education Settings: A Review Paper

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### 1. Introduction

A highly influential report by the Lancet Commission in 2010 called for major reform of health professional education worldwide and proposed that transformative learning should be the main vehicle and outcome of this process (Frenk et al. 2010, p.6). Transformative learning (TL), it was argued, would produce health professionals who are enlightened agents of change (*ibid*). The authors of the report positioned TL in a hierarchical relationships to other, previously dominant, forms of health care education:

‘We regard transformative learning as the highest of three successive levels, moving from informative to formative to transformative learning. Informative learning is about acquiring knowledge and skills; its purpose is to produce experts. Formative learning is about socializing students around values; its purpose is to produce professionals. Transformative learning is about developing leadership attributes; its purpose is to produce enlightened change agents’ (Frenk et al. 2010, p.6).

The Lancet Commission argued that informative learning had dominated health care training in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that this had evolved to formative learning based around problem-solving instructional methods in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that now in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century there was a need to move to transformative learning where ‘core professional competencies’ can be adapted to ‘specific contexts while drawing on global knowledge’ (Frenk et al. 2010, p.9).

While viewed as a pedagogical tool for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the idea of TL can be traced back to the 1970s (an era according to the Lancet Commission where health care pedagogy had just shifted to formative learning). Indeed, the roots of TL are generally traced back to the late Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy outlined in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968, 1970). Freire called for a new relationship between teacher and learner where both could engage actively in a manner that created space for learning on both sides. He criticized the dominant teacher-centred

pedagogical style of the time, notably referring to it as ‘banking education’ where teachers make deposits into the brains (containers) of the students, who are then expected to passively receive, memorize, and store this without any change occurring to the container itself (Freire, 1970, p.72).

While Freire’s work contained the seeds, it was Jack Mezirow who developed the theory of TL over a period of two decades from 1978. Mezirow came to define TL as ‘learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change’ (Mezirow, 2003, p.58-59). As with Freire, Mezirow was idealistic and viewed education as an active and political activity.

While Freire’s ideas are a staple of any graduate program on education globally, Mezirow’s ideas had been less widely disseminated outside the field of Adult Education. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, Mezirow’s theory of TL has stimulated important critical responses to the extent that there are now institutes of TL, international conferences (*International Conference of Transformative Learning*) and a journal dedicated solely to the idea (*Journal of Transformative Education*). Some of the leading universities now claim to be incorporating TL into their curriculums or are offering programs in TL (Kasworm and Bowles, 2012, p.397-398). Within the Japanese context, TL (translated as *変形学習 henkei gakushū*) has gained some attention within the field of Adult Education, and aspects have been incorporated within health care education to some degree, but general awareness remains low. Osaka University may be the first institution of higher education (HEI) to have Transformative Education as a programmed field of study.

To understand the roots of the theory and its application in higher education contexts, this paper offers a critical review of some of the literature on TL. In addition, we explore the practical application of TL in two different settings: study abroad programs and professional health education. The review part of this paper builds both on the original literature on TL and previous general review papers (Taylor, 1998; Taylor, 2007; Taylor and Snyder, 2012), but with a specific focus on higher education. Using key databases, we have drawn on articles written in English that combine keywords such as ‘transformative learning’, ‘post-secondary education’, ‘higher education’, ‘study abroad’, or ‘health education’, as data for this review. For the latter part of the paper, we draw on recent literature that has applied TL to study abroad and health education. As one of two papers focused on TL in the current issue, we hope that we can contribute to a wider discussion of 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning in HE in Japan.

## 2. Main Conceptualizations of Transformative Learning

John Dirkx (1998) categorized the development of TL into four main strands and identified the originator of each: transformation as consciousness-raising (Paulo Freire); transformation as critical reflection (Jack Mezirow); transformation as a developmental process (Larry Daloz); and transformation as individuation (Robert Boyd). At the same time, Taylor (2007), identified seven different 'lenses' in the literature through which TL theory has been developed or understood: individual perspective transformation; social transformation; sociocultural context; power relationships; and on cognitive, emotional and behavioral transformations. In this section we explore some of the main conceptualizations of TL.

### 2.1. Paulo Freire: Transformation as Consciousness-raising

Paulo Freire (1970) gained insights into pedagogy through working in the field of adult literacy in poor communities in Brazil. He regarded mainstream education of the time as fostering political, social, economic oppression as it 'minimize(s) or annul(s) the students' creative power' (p. 73) preparing adaptable learners who can only catalogue, collect knowledge and information rather than challenge and invent. This view is echoed in another giant in the field of education, Pierre Bourdieu (1970, 1992), who viewed education as reproducing invisible dominance. Bourdieu named the social norms and values that we uncritically assimilate, act upon, and view as natural, including those concerned with gender and race, 'symbolic violence'. Bourdieu argued that the oppressed are complicit in their oppression:

'the foundation of symbolic violence lies not in mystified consciousnesses that only need to be enlightened but in dispositions attuned to the structure of domination of which they are the product, the relation of complicity that the victims of symbolic domination grant to the dominant can only be broken through a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions that lead the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant on the dominant and on themselves' (Bourdieu, 1992, p.342).

Compared to Bourdieu's determinism, Freire viewed education as a means of liberation from oppression. Criticizing the 'banking system' of education, he proposed an alternative emancipatory pedagogy focusing on problem-posing that could raise the critical consciousness of the learner to question the status quo. Freire developed the idea of critical consciousness or conscientization (*conscientização*), which he defined as 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire, 1970, p.35). His pedagogy was one of hope with conscientization envisaged as potentially transformative at

individual and social levels. Freire (1970) wrote, ‘in problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation’ (Freire, 1970, p.83, emphasis in original). He perceived that emancipatory learning and critical consciousness provide the learner with a voice and words, an ability to describe their experiences and the world, and critical lenses to question the status quo (Freire, 1970, p.88).

Critical reflection, action and dialogue are important components of Freire’s emancipatory education. Calling reflection and action ‘praxis’, he argued that it is the very nature of humans ‘to *name* the world and change it’; however, ‘once named, the world in its turn reappears to the *namers* as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*’ (Freire, 1970, p.88). Grounded in humanism, Freire asserted that, ‘human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection’ (p.88). Emancipatory education, he argued, has to challenge the ‘culture of silence’ where people are not able to actively reflect on their situation. He viewed effective dialogue as an essential part of truly emancipatory education, yet something that can only be fostered in a learning environment that is inclusive, respectful, humble, and loving. As a part of this process, it was important to understand where the learners are situated and relate to their experience. As Freire (1970) wrote, ‘it is not our role to speak to the people about our view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours’ (p.96). Through radical, student-centered teaching that employs reflection and action, he argued educators can foster transformation by raising learners’ awareness of the structures within their society that were contributing to institutionalized oppression and inequality.

## 2.2. Jack Mezirow: Transformation as Critical Reflection

Jack Mezirow was greatly influenced by Freire’s notion of conscientization. Mezirow also drew on Habermas’s idea of the three domains of learning (technical, practical and emancipatory), and Kuhn’s idea of paradigm change to develop TL theory, which aimed to explain how adults learn and make meaning (Kitchenham, 2010, p.110; Mezirow, 1991; p.xiii). Mezirow was interested in the process by which adults develop perspective transformation. He defined perspective transformation as,

‘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 upon these new understandings’ (Mezirow, 1991, p.167).

Influenced by Kuhn's idea of paradigm change, Mezirow argued that everyday perspectives or frames of reference can limit our understanding—thus, they can be faulty or restrictive (Kitchenham, 2010, p.107). In 1978, based on a national study of women returning to college to participate in specialized adult reentry programs that he conducted, Mezirow first proposed a ten-phase process of perspective transformation (see Goharimehr and Bysouth, Table 1 in this journal). The process of transformation starts with a disorientating dilemma that requires reflection and then, subsequently, action. While proposing ten steps, Mesirrow noted that they did not have to be followed in a liner fashion for transformation to occur (Taylor, 1998, p.40; Mezirow, 1991, p.160). In developing the idea of phases of perception transformation, Mezirow wrote that:

‘transformation theory is not a stage theory, but it emphasizes the importance of the movement toward reflectivity in adulthood as a function of intentionality and sees it advanced through increased ability and experience, which may be significantly influenced by educational interventions. Transformative learning involves an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one’s beliefs and feelings, a critique of their assumptions and particularly premises, an assessment of alternative perspective, a decision to negate an old perspective in favor of a new one or to make a synthesis of old and new, an ability to take action based upon the new perspective, and a desire to fit the perspective into the broader context of one’s life’ (Mezirow, 1991; p.161).

While the process may not be linear, a transformation in how we perceive the world cannot be negated once it takes place. Mezirow (1991) noted that transformative learning is ‘irreversible once completed; that is, once our understanding is clarified and we have committed ourselves fully to taking the action it suggests, we do not regress to levels of less understanding’ (p.152). For example, if a disorientating event results in us questioning hitherto homophobic views, leading eventually to a new understanding of sexual diversity, we should not regress back to homophobia as a result of some kind of negative stimulus in the future.

Throughout his career, Mezirow (1978, 1991, 1997, 1998, 2003, 2012) consistently refined his theory of TL by incorporating different ideas (emotional and spiritual learning aspects), responding to critiques (inclusion of social context and power relationship), and ensuring that it was inclusive of contemporary theoretical perspectives. However, throughout these developments, his emphasis on the importance of critical reflection, role taking, dialogue, and action in TL remained persistent.

Expanding Freire’s ideas of praxis, Mezirow proposed two types of reflection: critical reflection of assumptions (CRA) and critical reflection on self-assumptions (CRSA). He argued that CRA occurs when individuals engage in content and process reflection—reflection on external matters,

the content of the problem and the process of making decisions (Mezirow, 1997). CRSA was first described as premise reflection (Mezirow, 1991, p.108), then as critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997), and is a process of critically assessing the premise of our efforts and self-reflection about our own biases, values, and beliefs. If someone is choosing a graduate program to apply to, for example, the question ‘what criteria should I use to determine the best graduate school to attend’ is a content reflection, while the question ‘have I gathered enough material to determine which graduate school is the best’ is a process reflection; and if we ask ourselves ‘why am I attending graduate school’, then it is a premise reflection—reflecting on our assumptions (Baumgartner, 2012, p.105). Mezirow came to see CRSA as the catalyst for transformation.

Another important process in transformation is change in one’s frame of reference. According to Mezirow (1997), a frame of reference is composed of two dimensions: habits of mind and points of view:

‘Habits of mind are broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of cultural, political, social educational, and economic codes’ (Mezirow, 1997, p.5-6).

Habits of mind are expressed through a specific point of view—collection of beliefs, value judgments, attitudes, and feelings that shape particular interpretations. Points of view can change continuously as we learn and ‘reflect on either the content or process by which we solve problems and identify the need to modify assumptions’ (Mezirow, 1997, p.6). However, habits of mind take time to change and occur either through the accumulation of new points of views or they may change directly when a person goes through a dramatic shift in their mindset. When we face a disorienting, life-changing dilemma, challenges or difficulties that we fail to make meaning from, tackle or understand with our existing mindset, this prompts us to reflect on our own presumptions, values, and beliefs. Through such critical reflection and dialogue, we can identify, assess, and reform the key assumptions on which our perspectives are constructed. Here we see the influence of Kuhn again.

Similar to Freire, for Mezirow, knowledge is constructed by the individual in relation to others; the core of the learning process itself is mediated through rational and critical reflection on the learners’ own assumptions and beliefs. Thus, the outcome of transformative learning, according to Mezirow, is more inclusive perceptions of the world, the ability to differentiate between diverse aspects of society, greater openness to other points of view, and the ability to integrate different dimensions of personal experience into meaningful and holistic relationships.

### 2.3. Transformation as Individuation

While Freire and Mezirow emphasized the rational and cognitive dimensions of learning, Robert Boyd and colleagues (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Boyd, 1989; Boyd, 1991) addressed the psychosocial, emotional, and spiritual aspects drawing on Carl Jung's theories of psychological perspectives (Kucukaydin & Cranton 2013; Taylor 1998). Boyd viewed transformative adult learning as a process of individuation, becoming aware of our unconscious selves that are often shadowed by the ego, and accepting them through reflection and internal dialogue. Here he was influenced by Jung's idea of individuation—'the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated; in particular, it is the development of the psychological individual as being distinct from the general, collective psychology' (Jung, 1971 as cited in Lin & Cranton 2005, p.455).

Boyd viewed transformation in adults as an inner journey—'a life-long process of coming to understand through the reflection of the psychic structures (e.g. ego, shadow, persona, collective unconsciousness) that make up one's identity' (as summarized by Taylor, 1998, p.13). By understanding and accepting one's unconscious 'shadows' in relation to the outside world, an individual becomes more interdependent and experiences a 'heightened sensitivity to life and people' (Lin & Cranton, 2005; see also Scott, 1997). In this process, transformative learning is not about becoming an autonomous individual thinker (as Mezirow viewed it), but rather developing a greater interdependent relationship with the world and compassion for society (Taylor, 1998). Dirkx (2012) further expanded Boyd's ideas and focused on how images and symbols (through poetry, arts, literature, and music) can be used to facilitate this dialogue within oneself and in relation to the world. Through imaginative engagement with images and symbols, we can come to a deeper understanding of ourselves, and our relationships with the world around us (Dirkx, 2012, p. 122-125). This view of TL as holistic, emotional and spiritual development has had an impact on many educational programs encouraging the adoption not only of text reading and dialogue, but also arts, literature, images, or films as tools for inner reflection and dialogue (see the application of TL in HE settings below for further details).

### 2.4. Other Lenses of Transformative Learning

O'Sullivan (1999) promoted a transformative educational vision emphasizing the importance of critique and creativity. He critiqued market-driven approaches to education, materialistic ideology, and consumer culture that are dominant in today's neoliberal society and viewed critical and holistic education as necessary for the survival of the planet.

Other scholars in the wider educational field, such as James Banks' work on multicultural education, have also discussed transformative teaching and learning. In his argument for

transformative pedagogy, Banks (1995) states that educators should facilitate learners to examine the historical antecedents of institutional oppression to better understand the underlying causes of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. The transformative approach, one of four approaches to integrating multicultural education into the curriculum forwarded by Banks, requires teachers to deconstruct their knowledge and beliefs, explore and present other cultures and voices that are not included (or silenced) in current mainstream teaching. The fourth of the approaches outlined by Banks, the Social Action approach—an extension of transformative approach—requires students to act on their newly formed knowledge, skills, and voices, and to take social actions to change the system (Banks & Banks, 2004, p.15).

Although diverse conceptualizations of TL theory have emerged over the last four decades, researchers are now focusing on the integration of different approaches in order to build a unified theory. Indeed, TL theory has emerged as an important tool in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to train young people and adults to become competent, interdependent, inclusive, and responsible human beings who are both intellectually and emotionally mature, engaged in lifelong self-learning, and who take actions against inequity.

In the following section we move on to look at two examples of how TL theory has been adopted in the HE setting focusing on study abroad and health education.

### **3. Transformative Learning in the Higher Education Context**

In this increasingly internationalized and globalized society, HEIs are required to engage students not only in local or national issues, but also in global trends and emerging issues, develop their critical thinking skills so that they are able to function effectively in our highly complex and demanding society. However, as Blake, Sterling & Goodson (2013) have noted, there is an ‘inherent tension between market-oriented neoliberal approaches where student capacity to be productive in a market economy is emphasized and more holistic conceptions of the role of universities’ in this era of global ecological challenge (p. 5348). In his article published at *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Robin Wilson noted that instead of being the centers of higher academic education, colleges and universities are turning to become care providers, and student affairs professionals are treated as substitute parents (as students are increasingly viewed as customers and HEIs as service providers) (Wilson, 2015). The current debate in the HE sector in the US over ‘trigger warnings’ on sensitive materials is a point in case about changed environment for teaching and learning in some universities today (see for example Brown, 2016).

Yet, higher education institutions are argued to be 'uniquely positioned to facilitate transformative experiences in learners, who may, through critical examination of the norms within their environment, develop heightened consciousness of their conditions' (Glisczinski, 2007; p.320). Many scholars (Glisczinski, 2007; Lin & Cranton, 2005; Blackie, Case & Jawitz, 2010; Stevens-Long et al., 2012) have emphasized that Freire's criticism of traditional education is still valid in the current HEI context where increasingly the expectation that learning will meet market expectations has, once again, encouraged instrumental teaching that molds students to fit into the current neoliberal structure and value system. The aim is to prepare professionals who accept the dominant neoliberal logic rather than learners who want to question the system. Moreover, as some scholars have argued (Thomas, 2009; Blake, Sterling, & Goodson, 2013; Cotton, Bailey, Warren, & Bissell, 2009), tweaking educational provision to facilitate small changes in curriculum will not lead to transformative learning; instead the institutional setting and the pedagogy need to be aligned to reflect the values that are desired. Nevertheless, as the Lancet Commission report makes clear (see the section below for more details) creating professionals who can question and innovate is regarded as important even in the current HE context.

TL theory envisages that educators will lead students to the edge of their thinking, challenge their assumptions, and help them develop inclusive and open perspectives. At the same time, it is noted that students may be at different intellectual and ethical stages of development (Perry, 1968, in Evans et al., 2010, p.85-87). If learners are pushed too far when they are intellectually not ready, Ettling (2012) warns, they may become defensive and withdraw from participation. He reminds educators to be aware of power relationships among learners and unequal risks in sharing one's history. Thus, educators should not force learners to share their stories, but encourage them to reflect and share through voluntary written narratives and journaling (Ettling, 2012; p.540).

### **3.1. Practical Strategies of TL in Higher Education**

Many scholars (Brown & Brown, 2015; Kreber, 2004; Carter, 2005; Lin & Cranton, 2005; Stevens-Long et al., 2012) emphasize the importance of critical reflection, dialogue, student-centered learning, and service learning components in higher education. For example, Blackie et al. (2010) argue that the student-centered approach is not just a different style of teaching, it is about being interested in, investing in, and paying attention to the actual process of learning that is happening within students (p.638). Blake, Sterling, & Goodson (2013) found in a study of two 'alternative ecological colleges' in UK (both emphasize sustainable education through learning that transforms individuals, businesses, and communities) that communal living (living and learning groups), small and diverse groups, support from within an institution, and openness from the educators to step out of their comfort zone were important factors of transformative learning for

sustainable education.

Kasworm & Bowles (2012) provide five domains of key intervention strategies to support transformative learning (p.392-396).

1. *Development of self-reflection, an emotional capability to openness, and critical disjunction*. This intervention strategy includes an intentional development of self-reflection through reflective logs, essays, blogs, or experiential activities such as role-playing focusing on disorienting dilemmas, engaging in cultural experiences that bring attention to issues of race, gender, class, power, and privilege.
2. *Strategies for critical reflection*. Action research projects, collaborative writing projects, engagements in critique, or the usage of critical assessments to help learners examine their assumptions, past experiences, and worldviews.
3. *Supportive social environment*. Creating safe, trusting, and respectful learning environments to support learners in transformation given that critical reflection and dialogue may induce a sense of vulnerability. Instructors, facilitators, or advisers play an important role in providing this positive learning environment and guiding learners.
4. *Use of arts, literature, film, and drama as tools for transformative learning to expose learners to diverse contexts, realities, and perspectives*. Through film and fiction that are concerned with social justice the learners awareness of power structures that maintain inequalities may be heightened. They can also be encouraged to develop alternative perspectives by standing back and viewing the lives of the characters (Jarvis, 2006).
5. *Holistic, affective, and spiritual processes*. Intentional designs that focus or embrace the non-cognitive aspects of transformative learning such as emotions, mindfulness, and spirituality.

### 3.2. TL in Study Abroad Programs

Jane Jackson (2010) has argued that in the increasingly market driven process of internationalization in HE, student exchange has focused overly on meeting numerical targets, and paid insufficient attention to the outcome or 'ways in which returning students and faculty can share their new understandings with those who remain on their home campus' (Jackson, 2010, p. 24). In her keynote speech at the Project MILSA (Mentoring Intercultural Learning Through Study Abroad) workshop held at the University of Bern, Switzerland on April 14-15, 2016, Jackson called for the creation of transformative mentoring programs to increase the benefit of intercultural exchange programs and to foster better participation of students on campus (Cottier, 2016).

TL theory has been applied in a number of studies on study abroad and in cross-cultural

programs in order to better understand exchange students' experiences and to develop intervention programs (Coghlan and Gooch, 2011; Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2014; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011; Mwebi & Brigham, 2009; Smith et al., 2014), as well as to assess the outcome of students' experience (e.g. Le & Raven, 2015; Stone, 2014). Alex Kumi-Yeboah & James (2014) focused on factors that led to transformative learning among international students from Africa studying in the US, while Garrett Stone (2014) aimed to find a relationship between transformative learning processes and study abroad outcomes through linear regression models. Both studies were quantitative and drew on King's (2009) Learning Activity Survey that has been validated through series of interviews, pilot studies, and a panel review. Kumi-Yeboah & James (2014) found that classroom activities (classroom discussion, mentoring, personal self-reflection, class projects, term papers/essays, assigned readings), faculty support, and learning a new language were important tools for transformative learning. In this study, the international students from Africa noted that the different way of teaching (the student-centered approach in the US compared to teacher-centered instruction type in home country), team based class projects, the importance placed on participation in discussion, and the freedom given to offer personal opinions helped them expand their perspectives.

Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) reported from their study that, 'being an outsider in their host society and being away from home enabled more risk taking behavior, an opportunity to experience a new or different identity' (p.1146). Chang et al. (2011) also noted that a new location and culture is the prime place to explore, try and test an evolving identity. On the other hand, other studies found obstacles in transformative learning in study abroad programs. Foronda and Belknap (2012) determined three factors that could potentially stop transformation from occurring: (a) egocentrism/emotional disconnect; (b) perceived powerlessness/being overwhelmed, and (c) a vacation mindset. Closer examination of these challenges that inhibit and factors that facilitate transformative learning experience is imperative to promote propitious impact of study abroad experiences.

Given Mezirow's early emphasis on a 'disorienting dilemma' for kicking off the process of transformation (Mezirow, 1978), the study abroad experience would appear to be an excellent vehicle. However, even the above brief overview of the literature shows, there is a need to implement a controlled or well thought-out intervention to ensure that the learner is engaged in self-reflection, participates in in-depth dialogue with both local and international students, takes part in service learning activities in the local culture, shares their perspectives and applies new insights to their learning in their home country. Such interventions should start even before students leave their home country so that they are not overwhelmed, but instead are properly

prepared for the challenges ahead and have the appropriate mindset.

### 3.2. TL in Health Education

In 2010, the Lancet Commission called for a major institutional and instructional reform in professional health education to meet the demands of the new era where information technology, global movement, increasing inequality within and between countries, and a gap between pedagogical theory and practices bring new challenges to health care and for health care practitioners. The Commission articulated their vision as follows:

‘all health professionals in all countries should be educated to mobilise knowledge and to engage in critical reasoning and ethical conduct so that they are competent to participate in patient-centred and population-centred health systems as members of locally responsive and globally connected teams’ (Frenk et al. 2010, p.33).

For this vision, the commission proposed reform aimed at making ‘transformative learning’ the highest-level learning outcome of this process (see Table 1). The importance of TL was outlined as follows:

‘As a valued outcome, transformative learning involves three fundamental shifts: from fact memorisation to searching, analysis, and synthesis of information for decision making; from seeking professional credentials to achieving core competencies for effective teamwork in health systems; and from non-critical adoption of educational models to creative adaptation of global resources to address local priorities’ (Frenk et al. 2010, p. 34)

In other words, the vision is that in this new era of fast changing global society, health education reform will bring about a radical student-centered, critical pedagogy and institutional transformation that closes the gap between stated values (to address the social determinants of health for example) and actual practices (where health care is fractured by its disciplinary base and local priorities).

In order to achieve transformative learning, the Commission proposes the 4Cs: criteria for admission (admissions to diverse students that align with the diversity of patients and population), competencies (‘habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and the community being served’), channels (diverse learning channels such as through IT) and career pathways (commitment to professionalism) (Frenk et al. 2010, p. 24-28).

**Table 1. Levels of learning (Frenk et al., 2010, p. 33)**

	Objectives	Outcome
Informative	Information, skills	Experts
Formative	Socialisation, values	Professionals
Transformative	Leadership attributes	Change agents

Following on from this, our review search revealed that since the Lancet Commission's call for reform, over a dozen studies have been conducted in the area of professional health education that have examined the potential of TL theory to create a better educational model. For example, Fleming (2014) called for discussions among adult educators and health professionals to create and facilitate transformative learning opportunities for patients and caregivers. McAllister et al. (2013) developed the STAR (Sensitive Take Action and Reflection) framework as a tool for educators to enhance student health professionals' capacity and preparedness to address health inequities. Stupans et al., (2013) called for careful scaffolding and assessment task design within universities and the use of clinical placement handbooks to encourage students to engage in deeper levels of reflective writing during clinical placements. Moreover, in the wellness and physical education area, researchers have called for a TL approach through curriculum design that includes paying attention to personal experiences, reflective practice, and active self-managed learning (Goss, Cuddihy, & Michaud-Tomson, 2010).

#### 4. Discussion

Educators, business leaders, government and non-government agencies have been calling for schools and colleges to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills and competencies. These are high-order skills that allow individuals to be effective and functional in a multitude of diverse settings, and it is hoped that they also foster civic and international mindedness. In addition, HEIs are challenged to move beyond the neoliberal ideologies of the market economy towards building education for sustainable development. In this endeavor to reform educational practices and programs to better respond to the fast changing context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, TL theory can provide guidance, framework and offer strategies for institutional vision, goals, and create intervention programs.

One way to foster TL in the higher education setting is through study abroad programs by incorporating some of the intervention strategies mentioned in this review such as active journaling, writing narratives of personal experience, facilitation of in-depth dialogue and

engagement in service-learning throughout the student journey. In addition, more emphasis is needed on pre- and post-study abroad programs to prepare students emotionally and intellectually (such as through literature, arts, and films); and to involve these students in mentorship, leadership or community development programs to apply their perspectives, intercultural skills, and global knowledge. This requires greater flexibility in how we deliver HE curriculum.

TL also suggest we can take new approaches for assessment that moves beyond measuring knowledge, skill or competency development. Studies mentioned in this paper offer ideas for assessment that promotes reflection and personal growth in a holistic manner. Proposals for TL to be introduced into health education programs requires an expansion of assessment to include not only student learning and competencies, such as critical thinking skills, but also the ability to work in diverse settings, tackle complex issues, challenge social norms that oppress others, and view issues from multiple perspectives. While the idea of TL has received very little attention in Japan, we suggest that it be given more attention in the HE sector as it may offer the possibility of fostering learners who are better equipped to address the increasing complex issues facing the society.

## 5. Conclusion

One of the most referenced theories in *Adult Education Quarterly Journal* (Christie et al. 2015), TL predates the idea of 21<sup>st</sup> learning skills. Proposed originally in the 1970s it sets a guiding conceptual framework to understand how adults learn, grow, challenge themselves and engage in transformative processes that, if anything, is even more relevant today than in the 1970s (Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Transformative Learning Network, 2016). Today the theory has come to embrace the idea of many other scholars (Freire's TL for social transformation; Mezirow's TL for perspectives transformation; Boyd's TL as individuation; Dirkx's emphasis on imaginative engagement) moving towards a holistic framework. Much of the visions of TL aligns with current discourses in HEIs for sustainable education, internationalization, and professional health education. The aim is to prepare critical social agents, who are globally connected but are aware of local issues, with competencies to tackle complex issues from interdisciplinary perspectives, apply their learning across diverse areas and situations. As Kegan (2009) noted, as adults we need transformation, not information. Instead of just filling the 'containers' of our students with information, we need to expand those containers so that they are conscious of how they make meaning.

### Notes

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## **Transformative Learning Theory and its Application in Higher Education Settings: A Review Paper**

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### **Abstract**

A highly influential report by the Lancet Commission in 2010 called for a major reform of health professional education worldwide and proposed that transformative learning (TL) should be the main vehicle and outcome of this process (Frenk and Chen et al., 2010, p.6). Transformative learning, it was argued, would produce health professionals who are enlightened agents of change (ibid). The idea of TL is not new and its roots can be dated back to Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, outlined in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968, 1970), and Jack Mezirow's idea of perspective transformation, introduced in 1978 and then developed into the theory of TL (Mezirow, 1991). While Freire was interested in the possibilities of education as an emancipatory vehicle for the poor and illiterate in Latin America, Mezirow's concerns were with Adult Education and individual transformation. Early work on transformative learning focused on cognitive and rational processes that prompted critical reflection, but recent studies, such as Dirkx (2012) and Tisdell (2012), have moved towards incorporating the emotional, spiritual and embodied dimensions of learning to embrace a more holistic approach.

This paper offers a critical review of the literature on TL and then explores how this idea is being implemented in two different higher education settings: study abroad programs and in professional health education. The review part of this paper draws on both original literature on TL and three previous review papers (Taylor, 1998; Taylor 2007, Taylor and Snyder, 2012), while focusing specifically on higher education. Using key data bases, we have drawn on articles that combine the terms transformative learning or education with post-secondary or higher education. The latter half of the paper explores the vision and practice of TL in study abroad programs and professional health education. As one of two papers focused on TL in the current issue, we hope that we can contribute to a wider discussion of 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning in HE in Japan.

Key words: Transformative learning, critical pedagogy, higher education, internationalization, health education, study abroad