Trainers and transformation: Facilitating the ‘dark side’ of vocational learning

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ABSTRACT
‘Transformative learning’ is a term used by Mezirow (1991) and his followers to designate a specifically ‘adult’ kind of learning that involves shifts in how learners view the world and themselves. New research into learning in VET suggests that in some subject areas transformative learning may play more than an incidental role. Among the implications of this finding is that the trainer’s practice may be more important in VET than it has been the custom to acknowledge. When transformative learning systematically contributes to VET, the trainer becomes a co-constructor of competence rather than a transmitter of skills and knowledge. This paper reports on this new research and reflects on the role of the trainer in the process of VET-oriented transformative learning. Results indicate that some trainers of youth workers develop a practice that responds to the contours and dangers of transformative learning without necessarily being aware of the body of knowledge that has built up around this type of learning. The paper suggests that in some VET sectors, trainers and RTOs could enhance their work by taking stock of transformative learning research and theory.

**Keywords:** Vocational education and training; transformative learning; youth work;
INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on new research into vocational education and training (VET) as a setting for ‘transformative learning’. This kind of learning was described and theorised by Jack Mezirow in a series of publications beginning in the late 1970s. Mezirow (1978) studied the experiences of women returning to formal education and noted that many of his research participants underwent deep changes in how they viewed themselves and their world in connection with their learning experiences. These women were all immersed in curricula with highly personal and often political goals, such as ‘consciousness raising’ groups and courses on feminism. By contrast, the research presented here deals with a sphere of learning that conspicuously pursues standardised ‘instrumental’ outcomes and for which the kind of learning described by Mezirow may be classed as ‘incidental’ and, in terms of systemic purposes, irrelevant.

In this paper a transformative pedagogy in VET is described. The basis of this description is interviews with four trainers in the area of youth work. These experienced and respected trainers had unique approaches to their work, but had also evolved a set of practices that converged upon learner experiences that may be comprehended in terms of Mezirow’s (1991) theory of transformative learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Transformative learning theory is concerned with deep changes in how adults see the world and themselves, and conceptualises these changes as a form of learning. As noted above, the theory of transformative learning stems from the work of Mezirow (1978) who originally researched women’s experiences in United States re-entry programs in the 1970s. These college re-entry programs were generally a mixture of formal academic subjects and self-awareness courses. The personal focus of these programs is reflected in the style of theory Mezirow developed, and continues to influence the research into transformative learning. For example,
Taylor’s (2007) review of transformative learning research identifies typical settings such as higher education, professional development, health education, adult basic education and community based programs. In contexts like these, personal change can be an end in itself or at least a welcome and complementary outcome.

At the centre of Mezirow’s (1991) theory is a dichotomy between learning at the level of discrete, specifiable skills or chunks of knowledge, and learning which involves a change in how a person thinks and feels about the world and themselves. Mezirow terms the units involved in the first kind of learning ‘meaning schemes’ and that which alters in the second kind of learning ‘meaning perspectives’, and proposes that meaning schemes are generated by meaning perspectives. Learning at the level of meaning schemes can involve extending an existing scheme by improving techniques or learning new ways to apply existing knowledge, or it can consist in acquiring new schemes, such as occurs when a qualitatively new fact or skill is learnt. In both of these cases the relevant generative meaning perspective forms the horizon of the learning, and is enriched or augmented in the process. Another kind of learning at the level of meaning schemes occurs when experience confronts the learner with content that conflicts with existing meaning schemes. This can lead to the transformation of meaning schemes. Because meaning schemes are intimately connected with their meaning perspectives, the perspective itself is challenged at the same time as the original scheme. If a transformation of schemes fails to reconcile the learner to the disturbing experience, the challenge may lead to the transformation of the meaning perspective itself. It is this latter kind of learning, the transformation of meaning perspectives, that Mezirow calls ‘transformative learning’.

Mezirow (1991, p. 168–9) suggested that the process of meaning perspective transformation generally, but not necessarily, follows these stages:

1. A disorienting dilemma;
2. Self examination with feelings of guilt or shame;
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions;
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are
shared and that others have negotiated a similar change;
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
6. Planning a course of action;
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans;
8. Provisional trying of new roles;
9. Building of competence and self confidence in new roles and relationships;
and
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective.

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning can be understood as belonging to the American tradition of humanistic educational philosophy that draws from Dewey and takes on a specifically adult learning focus through the contributions of Lindeman and Knowles (Elias and Merriam 2005). The influence of Dewey, Lindeman and Knowles can be traced in Mezirow’s concern with the growth of the individual adult and his belief that the transformative learning process transcends the problematics of disciplinary knowledge and pedagogy. At the same time, Mezirow (1991) argues that Dewey discerned the role of background assumptions in the formation of meaning, and acknowledged the importance of conscious reflection in the learning process, both key themes in transformative learning theory.

The emphasis on the critical assessment of assumptions in Mezirow’s work suggests parallels with Argyris and Schön’s (1978) concept of ‘double-loop learning’. Their ‘single-loop learning’ occurs when feedback from the consequences of a course of action or strategy serves to modify the action. However, the underlying ‘norms, policies and objectives’ (Argyris and Schön 1978, p. 3) that govern the strategy remain unchallenged in this kind of learning. Double-loop learning takes place when the assumptions underlying the strategy are challenged. Although Argyris and Schön (1978) are conceptualising professional and organisational learning in this theory, the idea of questioning, assessing or challenging the
framework that shapes particular courses of action and the implication of two levels or ‘loops’ of learning aligns their thinking with Mezirow’s conceptualisation of individual learning.

Other learning theories share Mezirow’s focus on significant personal change. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) associate the work of Mezirow and Freire on the basis of their common concern with transformation. However, Freire’s learning theory contrasts with Mezirow’s in that Freire views personal change as a precursor of collective change, and regards socially relevant emancipation as the overarching goal of learning. Although Mezirow has argued for the emancipatory significance of his theory, the dynamics of transformative learning are rooted in individual experience. This focus on learning as personal change finds echoes in the phenomenographic research reported by Marton, D’All Alba and Beaty (1993). They discern six ‘conceptions of learning’ that describe the ways their subjects understand learning, such as ‘Increasing one’s knowledge’ and ‘Memorizing and reproducing’, but also find that ‘Changing as a person’ is a distinct way learning is conceived. Marton, D’All Alba and Beaty (1993, p. 292) suggest that this conception ‘adds an existential aspect to learning’ which is hierarchically related to the more accumulative forms of learning upon which it builds.

The personal impact of the challenges of transformative learning has been the subject of much attention in the transformative learning literature. According to Mezirow (1991, p. 168), ‘These challenges are painful; they often call into question deeply held personal values and threaten our very sense of self.’ It stands to reason that a mode of learning that reaches below the level of overt behaviours and propositional knowledge to the very well-springs of our identity – to the level of why we act and how we think – can only invite profound discomfort. This is the reason Brookfield (2000) refers to the reflective process of transformative learning as the ‘dark side’ of adult learning, while Scott (1997) goes so far as to invoke the metaphor of the ‘grieving soul’ to highlight key dimensions of the experience. However, such characterisations should not obscure the fact that in most cases the total process of transformative learning is regarded by learners as an
essential positive experience leading, as Mezirow (1991, p. 155) puts it, to a more ‘inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective …’

Given the complexity of transformative learning, and the depth of impact it can obviously have on the lives of adults, the importance of the role of the adult educator in transformative learning has been stressed by many writers and researchers (e.g. Mezirow 1991, Taylor 2008). In the transformative learning literature much attention has been given to the learning activities that promote transformative learning and the considerable skill required by the educator to promote and support transformative learning (e.g. Cranton 2006).

There are two general factors that are likely to deter transformative learning research in VET, at least in Australia. Mention has already been made of the fact that in VET, outcomes are standardised. These standards are drawn from industry in a systemic context in which national economic imperatives have unquestioned priority over the vagaries of personal development (Smith and Keating 2003). VET, in other words, does not obviously offer itself as fertile ground for the study of transformative learning experiences. A second factor, bound up with the origins of transformative learning theory and its subsequent development, is to be found within the theory itself. Mezirow (1991) adapted elements of Habermas’ concept of knowledge-constitutive interests to create a classification of learning types that included a sharp distinction between instrumental and communicative learning. Learning to do things with things to achieve an explicit purpose is instrumental learning, while learning the complexities of relating to others and revealing ourselves in interaction is communicative. Mezirow (1996) linked transformative learning with the potential of communicative learning and subtly distanced it from the domain of instrumental learning. The influence of this distinction is evident in a tacit disdain for technical learning fields within the transformative learning literature, and a dearth of research into the transformative potential of technical learning.

The research at the basis of this paper works against these currents, but not out of any particularly perverse intentions. Rather, the researcher had observed
possible transformative learning whilst occupying various staff roles within RTOs, and realised that this was a phenomenon that appeared to defy the instrumental image of vocational learning and whose investigation might yield useful data for the theory and practice of VET in Australia, and perhaps for transformative learning theory too. In addition, some important writers in the transformative learning field, including Mezirow himself (e.g. 1991, p. 110) and Cranton (e.g. 2006, pp. 102-3), have made enticing, encouraging, but too brief remarks about the role vocational learning might play in perspective transformation. Neither of these writers, however, pursued the issue beyond isolated references. The purpose of the research reported in this paper is to throw more light on the relationship between transformative learning and VET.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative data used in this paper is taken from a larger study that set out to explore the phenomenon of transformative learning in the context of VET. The overarching research project followed a mixed-methods design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) that initially involved administering a paper-based questionnaire based on King’s (1998) ‘Learning Activities Survey’ (which has been employed in some well-received research in the field of transformative learning – see Taylor 2007) to 93 learners enrolled in ten courses from seven VET program areas. The survey results were employed to guide the selection of three cases to form a multiple-case study (Yin 2003). Two groups – a Certificate IV in Youth Work program group and a Diploma of Frontline Management program group – represented high levels of transformative learning according to the survey results. The third case – the Motorcycle Maintenance Apprenticeship group – was selected for contrast, and represented lower levels of transformative learning as indicated by the survey results.

Three sources of data were used to build each case. All of the learners in each group who had consented to participating in follow-up interviews were contacted and interviewed, including both those whose survey results suggested
transformative learning experiences and those whose results indicated little or none. Second, at least three ‘industry specialists’ – practitioners with more than ten years’ recent experience in the industry and/or practitioners who had contributed to the construction of Competency Standards in their specialty areas – were interviewed to throw light on any potential meaning perspective aspects of work and learning in their fields. Third, practicing trainers of the case programs, including trainers of the case learner groups, were interviewed. The research was conducted in public and private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) located in Adelaide, South Australia.

A semi-structured interview format was adopted for the trainer interviews. The interviewer asked the trainers open-ended questions around the following themes:

- The types of change they sought in their learners
- Whether aspects of the program they teach challenge or disturb learners
  - How they deal with learners experiencing personal change
  - What strategies, if any, did they use to suppress, support or promote personal change in learners.

Part of the interview involved asking the participants to consider a set of statements that described in jargon-free language the ten stages (presented above) of the transformative learning process according to Mezirow (1991). After looking at the statements, the interviewees were asked whether any of them described learner experiences with which they were familiar. The trainers of both youth work groups were also asked to attempt a ranking of learners, from most significantly changed to least, and this information was compared to the results from the initial surveys.

The evidence discussed in this paper derives from the youth work trainer interviews, although some reference is made to other data as appropriate. The youth work learner group in one of the case studies produced the highest transformative learning in the survey, with just over half of the group of 12 indicating
transformative experiences. The learner interviews largely confirmed the survey results. The youth work trainers included one who taught the case learner group and one who taught the second youth work group surveyed. Two other youth work trainers who worked in different RTOs were also invited to participate in the research as a way to triangulate the data. Of the four trainers, two were slightly acquainted, but none worked together or ever ‘swapped notes’ on pedagogy.

NVivo 8 software was used to facilitate and manage a ‘thematic analysis’ (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the interview data. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) define this kind of analysis as ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.’ The researcher followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) suggestions for developing themes through phases of immersion in the data (multiple readings of the transcripts and listening to the interview recordings), generating initial codes (the identification of features of the data that highlight discrete units of meaning), searching for themes (trawling through the list of codes to identify broad patterns), reviewing the themes (refining themes by grouping closely related initial themes and reducing duplication), and naming the themes (giving the refined patterns definitions and unique names). Many themes emerged from this analysis, but the elements of the ‘transformative practice’ described below represent the themes which were common to all four trainers.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

It barely needs mentioning that as experienced professionals, the interviewees had each developed unique repertoires of training techniques, styles of training, and interests, likes and dislikes in relation to the work of trainers. Like all seasoned trainers, they were able to articulate a position on the nature of learning, the promise and problems of the VET system, what makes a good trainer, etc. However, what these youth work trainers share are core elements of what will be referred to as a ‘transformative practice’. These elements were not evident as a set in the practices described by trainers in the management and motorcycle maintenance program case studies.
Intending personal change
Perhaps the most striking revelation of the interviews with the youth work trainers was that they all clearly saw their role as involving the facilitation of some sort of ‘significant change’ in their learners (except in the relatively rare event that a learner enters the course already in possession of the attitudes ideal for a youth worker). This perception of the trainer’s role was in clear contrast with the management and motorcycle maintenance trainers. For example, when probed on this point, one of the management trainers acknowledged that although significant change might be something a skilled trainer could precipitate, he thought it was a ‘questionable practice morally’ with ‘no legitimate place’ in management training.

The youth work trainers were asked whether they actively promoted significant change in learners, and if so, why? They all answered in the affirmative and emphatically. These elaborations capture the tone of the responses:

That is the whole ethos of my training … somebody once called me a ‘change agent’ …..What I do is change people’s awareness of who they are, raise their awareness of who they are going to work with and my training is that bridge between those two things … (Trainer 3)

… youth work is a lot more sophisticated than most learners think and a lot more complex, so you have to promote change. It is not a matter of them learning a step-by-step skill because you are dealing with people. They [the learners] have to be changed, they have to be aware. (Trainer 1)

Priming
The youth work trainers in this study actively prepared learners for change. They told their groups of learners at the start of the program, or advised individuals during pre-course interviews, to expect challenge and change at a personal level. These statements describe how two trainers primed their learners:

… are you prepared for me to push your buttons, because I’m going to. (Trainer 2)
… I will always say at the beginning of everything I teach that one of the processes of learning is that you are being challenged and that youth work within itself is one of the those professions [which] encourages and engenders lots of issues that people find that they mind [and] that trigger their own personal issues or challenge them. So I say that at the beginning of most things that I teach or if it is at the beginning of a course I will say that, and say to individuals if at any time you are feeling overwhelmed by that or you are feeling like you need to seek me out and speak to me about that then please do that – don’t leave it unattended. (Trainer 4)

Another trainer warned learners that they might find themselves or see others in tears, or they might find themselves in conflict with other learners as a result of some learning activities. Interviews with the learners in one of these groups showed that they clearly recalled being warned about the impact of the course by their trainer, and that they were apprehensive yet sceptical at the time about the potential of the course to really push them out of their comfort zones.

**Challenging**
All of the youth work trainers saw the process of challenging learners as essential to their practice, and a positive experience for learners, despite the discomfort this could produce. Some variety in the techniques these trainers used to challenge learners was evident, although most found that role play was particularly effective. Discussion that focussed on value dilemmas was also a favoured method, and one that could easily lead to conflict between learners:

I used to do a lot of role plays and I always used to do one with agree, strongly agree, disagree, strong disagree and I would give them moral and ethical dilemmas like you wouldn’t believe and I would do this in the first week of the course. I would put things like ‘abortion is murder’ and people would go ‘definitely agree/strongly disagree’, [or] ‘cannabis should be legalised’, and I would give them some of the most revolting things that I could possibly write just so they get an understanding it is not about you it is about the client you are working with but there would be blow ups in the classroom environment and I loved it because I wanted these guys to get an understanding of what I modelled could be words out of a client’s
mouth. (Trainer 2)

There are other exercises you do as well about things like around confidentiality or telling people, debriefing from work and what you would do and what you wouldn’t do and there is a range of exercises that you do and ask questions and people are very keen. ‘I am professional and I wouldn’t disclose,’ and you just keep pushing them and pushing them until it is something to do with their own child or their sister and of course then they go, ‘actually, I would [breach confidentiality].’ We get them to reflect then on what that gap is. ‘Five minutes ago you were all telling me how professional you were and how you [wouldn’t] breach confidentiality, and now some of them are saying, ‘yes you would’, and you are actually quite convinced of that’. ‘It is my bloody right – if that was my daughter who was going out with someone who was HIV positive that I knew from the clinic, I would bloody well tell them.’ ‘But 5 minutes ago [you said] ‘that stays in the clinic, it is part of the clinic, I wouldn’t tell anyone, it is nobody’s business whether that person is HIV positive or not, we offer them a service that is valued’. They will spin off all this and [I] push, push, push and then suddenly it changes and even the people who say ‘no, I wouldn’t tell,’ I could still push them and I say, ‘you are kidding, what do you mean?’ and they will start the discussion within the group, the discussion will be raised and now at the end of it there is no resolution. (Trainer 1)

DVDs were found to be effective too. For example, one trainer described the use of excerpts from movies and documentary material sourced from television shows such as Four Corners. The latter were used to illustrate poignant realities of the youth work sphere, while searching questions were posed that threw an unfamiliar light on popular movie scenes.

All of the youth work trainers planned activities that called for learners to reflect on their own beliefs, values, assumptions and expectations. It was felt that promoting critical reflection was an essential part of the preparation of youth workers:

I plan exercises and sessions to deliver information and the questions that I put to the group will be self reflecting questions, scaling questions on where do you feel your such and such level is at the moment? What is your value system at the moment? What are you prioritising, what is important to you? Are relationships important to you? Things I guess – I definitely incorporate them as part of a plan. To me these are essential
things that need to be taught to people up and coming youth workers.
(Trainer 3)

**Maintaining tension**

Another striking feature of transformative practice is that when learning activities have the desired effect of pushing learners into a state of discomfort, the trainers strived to maintain the tension. These trainers actively sought to sustain and even heighten discomfort, and clearly did not indicate that they thought learners should be excused from this process:

... you need to relate to people and the way that you monitor the experience, if you like, of learning, of being disturbed so you don’t set people up to fail but you still want [the learners] to be challenged .... You would need to be skilful in monitoring that and in some of the instances I have given you, that is definitely what you are doing, you are allowing an idea to permeate but you are not allowing people to punch a hole in the wall and storm off.
(Trainer 1)

One trainer described a ‘time out’ option that the learners were inducted into:

The ‘time out’ option is you as an adult learner in an adult learning environment can get up. You don’t have to say anything to me. Walk out to the toilets or go outside, get some air, but you are *not allowed to go home*. (Trainer 3)

**Maintaining a psychologically safe environment**

Despite the fact that learners were actively challenged and held in a state of discomfort, the youth work trainers all systematically established and carefully maintained a psychologically safe environment in which learners could respond to their distress without feeling stigmatised. In the priming phase, learners were made aware that they may be pushed beyond the limits of their emotional endurance and that if they found themselves in that position, it was, despite appearances, part of a positive process, and that returning to the group and learning was expected. A psychologically safe environment is constructed through setting rules, priming and monitoring, as well as attending to the minutiae of the dynamics
of the class group.

It is being vigilant and monitoring. You go in basically with a lesson plan and some information and then it is just me being vigilant in how the students are responding or reacting to information. (Trainer 3)

Trainers are especially intent upon identifying and managing individuals who engaged in insensitive behaviour or ridiculing learners experiencing disturbance. Such potential threats to the supportiveness of the environment were addressed quickly, firmly, respectfully and usually on a one-to-one basis.

Someone might say in a learning environment ‘that girl is wearing a short skirt’ or ‘she deserved to be raped, you shouldn’t dress like that,’ but the girl next to her [has] actually [been] sexually assaulted in a street, so she is taking great offence. Now I don’t want her to belt him, but it is better if she gets up and takes a five minute walk, or call a little break and I will have a word to him about ‘this is a learning environment’, and I would say to him or her, ‘what you said there was really inappropriate, you become a youth worker, you have got to think about what comes out of your mouth. You are accountable for what comes out of your mouth because [if ] you say that in front of your client you have lost them’. That was the learning environment, but I also want to keep that person safe who had been [assaulted], but she also has to understand that she is going to hear that regularly in the sector, and she needs to have a safeguard on her own boundaries to work through that as well. (Trainer 2)

A transformative practice?

The above elements of the youth work trainers’ practice might be interpreted as a transformative practice or pedagogy. Several observations support this interpretation. First, the survey indicated that a relatively high number of learners in each of the youth work groups experienced transformative learning, and trainers of both groups participated in the trainer interviews that gave rise to the set of elements presented above. Second, the industry specialists described a field that involves almost continual engagement with moral dilemmas, one calling it a ‘political field’. It is to be noted that the youth work course Units of Competence were thought to provide only a faint reflection of the confronting and politically fraught nature of work in the field, and this apparent lack of correspondence between the central
realities of the youth work and the units was attested by all of the industry specialists and trainers. Finally, the learner interviews confirmed the survey results and provided rich accounts of experiences that can be readily accommodated to Mezirow’s (1991) descriptions of transformative learning. The learners consistently cited the influence of the trainer and learning activities on their learning experiences.

More evidence of a connection between the practice of the youth work trainers and the realities of transformative learning comes from the part of the interviews which involved the presentation of statements that corresponded with each stage of Mezirow’s (1991) ten-stage model of the transformative learning process. The trainers expressed familiarity with most or all of these descriptions, and were able to illustrate this recognition with examples of learner experiences. It was mentioned that the trainers of the surveyed youth work learner groups were asked to rank learners from most to least personally changed, and that these rankings substantially agreed with the results from the survey (which were in turn corroborated through the interviews with learners). After this ranking exercise, which provides more evidence of the trainers’ intuitive awareness of the nature of transformative learning, the interviewees were asked if the experiences of the most significantly changed learners corresponded to any of the statements representing Mezirow’s stages of transformative learning. The two trainers in question believed that the learners they thought were most changed went through most or all of the experiences described in the statements.

A final interesting detail is that all of the youth work trainers indicated that their practice is partly modelled on techniques used in the youth work field, a finding that may help to explain the parallels between these trainers’ practices. Analysis of the industry specialists’ responses as well as comments from the trainers suggests that youth work is a vocation that revolves around the problem of eliciting change in clients. Competent youth workers employ a form of many of these elements in their everyday work. They perceive their role as facilitators of change. They challenge their clients in a variety of ways. They maintain the pressure to
change until the benefits of change are internalised by the clients, and they carefully construct and maintain a supportive environment in which clients can experiment with change. This link between actual youth work practice and the pedagogical practice of the youth work trainers may also help to account for the confidence with which the trainers implemented techniques that produce and maintain discomfort, techniques from which trainers in other areas, such as management, would recoil.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has outlined a transformative practice evolved by four different trainers of the Certificate IV in Youth Work. These trainers were not aware of each others’ practices, yet there were distinct parallels between the ways they worked with learners. They were all clear that bring about ‘significant change’ in learners was a central part of their practice as youth work trainers. They understood these changes to be related to values, attitudes, outlooks and perspectives rather than purely skills and knowledge. They primed learners for change, framing the change process and structuring expectations. Then they involved learners in a range of activities, including role plays, value dilemma exercises, analysing movies and documentaries, as well as reflection upon assumptions and values in order to challenge participants. The trainers closely monitored the learners and their interactions, but not so that they reduce the risk of learners becoming disturbed by the challenges, but precisely so that they could maintain the tension in learners. Throughout these processes, the trainers maintained a psychologically safe environment so that when the tension became too much, learners would be able to react without feeling that they would be ridiculed. Indeed, a return to the group was an expectation that was clearly articulated during priming. This transformative practice is influenced by the practices of youth workers in the field, a fact that may help explain the convergence of the training practices.

An intriguing idea that emerges from the interviews with some of the industry specialists and trainers is that becoming a youth worker involves
developing skills, knowledge and attitudes that can transfer readily to other community service occupations. Most of the industry specialist participants believed that there was a continuum of practices that linked youth work with the broad range of ‘human service’ occupations. Trainers who had worked in community service settings outside of youth work confirmed this view. It is tempting to speculate that the transformative practice described in this paper may be relevant to trainers in other community services fields, and that perhaps transformative learning may be experienced by learners preparing for work in these related fields too. These possibilities may be worth researching.

Interestingly, none of the youth work trainers in this study were aware of the theory of transformative learning. One exclaimed that he was ‘glad it has a name’, while none felt that the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment usefully informed their practice as youth work trainers. Rather, it was clear, as noted above, that the strongest influence on the formation of this practice came from the domain of the youth work itself. Yet there is a theory of learning – transformative learning theory – that takes the ‘dark side’ of learning as its object, and an associated body of research into learners’ experiences and pedagogical practices that trainers can access. It should be pointed out that the research into transformative learning does not tend to contradict the spontaneously constructed practices of these youth work trainers described in this paper, but it does reach beyond these localised and isolated pedagogies, and provides a rich data and theory base to inspire reflection and development. Perhaps it is time to invite trainers and RTOs engaged in the preparation of youth workers to consider the promise of transformative learning to enhance their work and the experiences and learning outcomes of their students. The research presented above suggests that there may be much to gain by such an introduction.
References


