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# Transformative Learning as an "Inter-Practice" Phenomenon

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## Abstract

Transformative learning theory and practice-based theory both offer compelling but distinct accounts of adult learning. The vicissitudes of individual meaning-making is the focus of transformative learning theory whereas practice-based accounts view participation in social practices as the key to understanding learning. Despite their differing views of the relationship between social context, individual experience, and the processes of learning, transformative learning and practice-based learning theories can be regarded as complementary. In this article, elaborations of practice-based learning theory are drawn on to highlight the learning potential of movement between social practices. Mezirow's version of transformative learning theory is analyzed to disclose a role for social practices in the transformation process. In terms of the concepts of practice-based learning theory, it is proposed that "transformative trajectory" offers a potentially illuminating addition. In terms of Mezirow's theory, it is argued that transformative learning can be viewed as an "inter-practice" phenomenon.

**Keywords** transformative learning, communities of practice, practice theory, humanism

## Introduction

Transformative learning (TL) theory and practice-based learning (PBL) theory both offer compelling but distinct accounts of adult learning. TL theory, as developed by Mezirow (1978, 1991, 2000), is a broadly humanistic theory that conceptualizes a process by which individuals become aware of limiting assumptions, gaining autonomy and the power to determine their own actions as they do so. Practice-based theory, perhaps best known in the form of Lave and Wenger's (1991) "situated learning" theory, views learning in terms of trajectories of "membership" and the construction of personal identity in the context of a community of practice. It is worth emphasizing that the "practice" in PBL is a special application of the concept and that TL is just as "practical" a theory of learning as PBL. Both theories can inform practice. The key difference is in the *starting point* of each: in PBL the starting point is practice and in TL it is the individual in context. Mezirow's theory portrays the individual as operating in an increasingly conscious and critical relationship with social context, while the practice-based alternative promotes a nondualistic account of learners and context bound up in the dynamic unity of practice. Differences between the two approaches are heightened by claims made on each side. Mezirow, for example, declares that TL is *the* generic process of adult learning, while Lave and Wenger believed that they had uncovered the fundamental learning mechanism in "legitimate peripheral participation."

This article is intended to contribute to debate about the relationship between TL theory and practice-based theory. The argument that runs through it derives from the author's research into TL in vocational education programs in Australia that proved amenable to analysis in terms of both theories (Hodge, 2010, 2011). Although there are a number of "discourses" of TL (Tisdell, 2012), Mezirow's theory was employed to frame the research in part due to a distinction it makes between different levels of learning. Specifically, his

theory distinguishes between learning particular skills, knowledge, beliefs, values, and so on ("schemes") and learning at the level of over-arching structures of meaning ("perspectives") that are more general, largely unconscious, and infuse the particular acquisitions of learning with significance. This distinction helped pose the research question. Australian vocational education is competency-based—an approach to learning characterized by detailed specification of performances and underpinning knowledge relevant to work roles. It is focused on learning at Mezirow's level of schemes. But it is an approach unsuited to comprehending learning at Mezirow's second, broader level, the level of the transformation of perspectives.

The research found and studied examples of TL in competency-based programs, using an adaptation of King's (1998) "Learning Activities Survey" to identify groups whose learning appeared to be conducive to TL. Interviews with learners in two high transformation programs allowed the vicissitudes of learning to be examined in detail and analysis suggested that Mezirow's conceptualization of TL provided a coherent account of the learner experiences. The research also indicated that the TL experienced by some participants was oriented to the deeper assumptions of the occupations they were preparing to enter. Occupational experts were interviewed to explore the question of the vocational relevance of TL in the case programs, and it was possible to compare the signature assumptions of occupations described by these experts with the content of the changes described by the learners.

Although the finding that the TL of some learners converged on assumptions that could be specified in advance is not inconsistent with TL theory (especially in some of the elaborations that have explicitly addressed the social dimensions of learning, e.g., Belenky & Stanton 2000; Chin, 2006; Marsick, Bitterman, & van der Veen, 2000; Nohl, 2009), it is a result that is

highly consistent with the account offered by PBL theory. Lave and Wenger (1991), for example, view learning as a function of entry into and membership of social practices—such as an occupation—that involves the adoption of shared, tacit understandings, developing competence in the skilled pursuits of the practice, and the assumption of a common outlook on the nature of the work and its context. The learning of the participants in my research was demonstrably convergent on sets of assumptions characteristic of members of an occupational community of practice, regardless of the individual dynamics of the process that led them there. This research will be discussed in more detail later.

The purpose of this article is to explore the theoretical issues prompted by the identification of examples of adult learning that are amenable to analysis in terms of both TL and PBL theory. Despite apparent tensions between the premises of the two theories, the argument made here is that there are complementarities that can be drawn out that can account for not only the learning analyzed in my research but also other instances of TL research. To make this argument, I will first outline PBL theory and then introduce criticisms and more recent elaborations. I then examine Mezirow's theory to draw out the implications of an articulation between it and the concept of social practice. It is proposed that TL describes a possible experience of an individual who moves between social practices that conflict at the level of implicit assumptions. The case is made, in effect, for regarding TL as an "inter-practice" phenomenon.

Demonstrating the complementarity between TL and PBL has both theoretical and practical yields. TL theory offers a well-researched conceptualization of the experiences of individuals who leave a social practice and enter a new one, addressing a weakness of PBL that according to Fuller (2007) has been more focused on the experiences of individuals entering practices. TL theory suggests that the inter-practice space is distinguished by its own learning potential and

scope for identity work. PBL in turn provides a conceptualization of pre- and postperspective transformation ways of being, presenting an alternative way of engaging with the challenge set by Kegan (2000) to address both sides of the "transformational bridge" traversed by the learner (Kegan, 2000, p. 66). The concept of social practices serves as way to analyze these anchorage points, while the processes of "legitimate peripheral participation" in and "membership" of a practice community help us comprehend what is at stake when an individual enters, dwells within, and departs one. Educators intent on heeding Kegan's challenge can draw on PBL theory to understand the experiences of learners at the start of a transformative process (who may be renouncing membership of a community and its sources of identity and competence) and facilitating their entry into a new practice (by identifying and explicating membership trajectories and the peripheral activities typically undertaken by new members). Implications of viewing TL as an inter-practice phenomenon are examined further in the conclusion.

## Social Practices

Learning theories such as Lave and Wenger's (1991) are part of what has been called the "practice turn" in contemporary theory (Schatzki, 2001). Ortner's (1984) survey of developments in anthropology identified practice as a dominant concept in the field since the 1980s, and she singled out Marx's work as a key influence on the way the concept is understood. Other commentators highlight influence of the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger on the turn to practice (e.g., Rouse, 2006). Regardless of the prehistory of the practice turn, social practices have increasingly become a focus of research and basis for explaining other social phenomena. Regarding the scope of the concept, Rouse (2006) points out that applications of the practice idiom extend from the most mundane aspects of everyday life to highly structured activities in institutional settings. Some of the patterns of performances identified as "practices" are quite localized geographically or

historically, while others are of much more general extent. Practices range from ephemeral doings to stable long-term patterns of activity. (p. 499)

Examples of social practices discussed in this article include those found in workplaces, occupations, social movements, social classes, and consciousness-raising groups. What is peculiar about practice-based accounts of human being is highlighted by Schatzki (2001). He explains that

> practice approaches promulgate a distinct social ontology: the social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings. This conception contrasts with accounts that privilege individuals, (inter) actions, language, signifying systems, the life world, institutions/roles, structures, or systems in defining the social. These phenomena, say practice theorists, can only be analysed via the field of practices. Actions, for instance, are embedded in practices, just as individuals are constituted within them. (p. 3)

In the context of a discussion of learning theories, three points made by Schatzki (2001) are worth emphasizing. Practice theory views practices as in some way *embodied*, that what makes a practice distinctive is not necessarily something explicit, immediately available for conscious scrutiny or formalization. Rather, practices are based on tacit understandings, comprehended at a bodily level, and enacted in practical ways. Second, these tacit understandings are *shared* by practitioners. They are social before they are individualized, and individual enactment of them is a means of their social reproduction. Finally, practices are taken to be *constitutive of personal identity*. They prescribe ways of being human, modes of self-understanding, distinctive perspectives on the practice and the world. Yet, as Ortner (1984) points out, there is a political dimension of practices that makes them sites of contestation structured by power relations. Individuals do not merely reproduce the shared understandings of a practice, but alter them, and conflict is always possible between established participants and newer entrants.

## Practice-Based Learning Theory

Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of "situated learning" was influenced by the developments in anthropology described by Ortner (1984). Their theory drew on a series of case studies of learning in apprenticeships. They entertain a broad notion of apprenticeship in this work, covering a range of cultural settings (from Yacatec midwives to American meat cutters) and institutional forms (from training on naval vessels to participation in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings). What Lave and Wenger find is that participation in social practices constitutes the generic process of learning. They focus on what differentiates the participation possible for a novice or "newcomer" to the skilled activity of the expert or "old timer," elaborating the concept of "legitimate peripheral participation" as the character of a newcomer's learning. That is, there is an array of entry-level tasks and activities marked out and endorsed by the community of participants, and newcomers are expected to engage in them early on in their career or "trajectory" of participation. Progressively more demanding tasks are undertaken until the participant is a competent practitioner and thus a full member of the "community of practice."

Lave and Wenger (1991) distinguish the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge through participation in a community of practice from a deeper form of learning:

> A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretative support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e., for legitimate peripheral participation). (p. 98)

The connection between learning and participation argued by Lave and Wenger

(1991) underpins their claims about the relationship between learning and identity. To learn is not only to master the techniques and tools characteristic of a practice but to become embedded into the social structure of the practice. Participants become part of the community as they develop expertise. Lave and Wenger state that

> moving toward full participation in practice involves not just greater commitment of time, intensified effort, more and broader responsibilities within the community, and more difficult and risky tasks, but, more significantly, an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner. (p. 111)

Although Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that a community of practice is a site for the "construction of identities" (p. 53), they do not view the trajectory of membership as a mechanism of simple reproduction of the practice. As newcomers become old timers, they acquire a stake in the survival and development of what has become their practice, thus the potential for tension between newer and older members:

> Shared participation is the stage on which the old and the new, the known and the unknown, the established and the hopeful, act out their differences and discover their commonalities, manifest their fear for one another, and come to terms with their need for one another (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 116)

Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning illustrates the key moves of practice theory as outlined by Schatzki (2001) and Ortner (1984). That is, embodied, tacit understandings characterize practice, and newcomers become old-timers through participation in activities that inculcate these understandings. These understandings are shared among members of the community of practice and exist prior to their individual embodiment. Participation is also more than achieving practical mastery of these understandings. It is to take on a certain identity, one that is characteristic of full members of the community of practice. But membership is not limited to the

repetition of fixed identities and activities. The turnover of members, changing contexts and demands on the practice, and the inherence of shared know-how in embodied rather than (or as well as) formal codes ensures that practices can only ever be relatively stable structures.

## Critiquing and Building on Situated Learning Theory

Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal statement of PBL theory has been highly influential in some research fields. But as Fuller (2007) shows in her review of research influenced by Lave and Wenger, a number of weaknesses in the theory have become apparent. To begin with, researchers have criticized Lave and Wenger's conceptualization of communities of practice. Fuller draws attention to the "ambiguity surrounding the socio-spatial delineation of the concept," citing research by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) into the practices of school teachers. Their study found that some teachers could be regarded as members of smaller, tight-knit communities of practice such as subject departments within the school. Others were more clearly aligned to the broader community of practice of the teaching profession. Hodkinson and Hodkinson concluded that a distinction should be drawn between a "small scale version" of a community of practice, characterized by "spatial and social closeness and cohesion," and a more diffuse, "large scale version" of a community of practice, such as an occupation. They suggest that the term "community of practice" be retained for the close-knit social practice, and they propose that Bourdieu's notion of "social field" captures the essential features of broad social practices. These fields are conceived as a frame of reference that structures the behavior of people who are engaged in the same general pursuits (such as occupations like those of West African tailors, Yucatan mid-wives, or British schoolteachers) but are not necessarily aware of each other. This line of critique asserts that Lave and Wenger's original conceptualization of the community of practice was too narrow.

Another criticism examined by Fuller (2007) concerns Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptualization of the trajectory of membership. This trajectory, which constitutes the mechanism of learning and identity construction, is conceived as a one-way process that culminates in full membership. But in Wenger's (1998) follow-up research, based on a study of a department in an organization, a number of other trajectories are differentiated. Close attention to the complexity of a modern organization indicated that alongside the original trajectory of membership (what he now calls the "inbound" trajectory) were trajectories that included the "peripheral" (of a person who neverachieves full membership), the "insider" (of the full member who reinvents themselves in the context of volatile practices), "boundary" (of the individual whose work involves crossing practice boundaries and facilitating exchanges between them), and the "outbound" (of the member who leaves a community of practice). Wenger's explanation of this last trajectory highlights the distance between his later work and the original conceptualization of trajectory. Wenger (1998) explains that

> some trajectories lead out of a community of practice, as when children grow up. What matters then is how a form of participation enables what happens next. It seems perhaps more natural to think of identity formation in terms of all the learning involved in entering a community of practice. Yet being on the way out of such a community also involves developing new relationships, finding a different position with respect to a community, and seeing the world and oneself in new ways. (p. 155)

With the addition of an outbound trajectory to PBL theory, the single, situated social practice is no longer considered the sole context of learning. This position is elaborated in other research discussed by Fuller (2007). Reflecting on the results of research by Österland (1996) into the learning of sales people, Fuller (2007) concludes that

> the notion of learning in communities of practice places too much emphasis

> on the learning that takes place "inside the community" and does not reflect the importance of the learning that takes place through participation in multiple social spaces and in the process of crossing between contexts. (p. 26)

## Transformative Learning Theory and Social Practices

These criticisms and elaborations of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory set the scene for the argument that TL theory and PBL theory are complementary. In this section, TL theory is examined with a view to highlighting aspects of the theory that are amenable to interpretation in terms of practice theory. Mezirow's concepts are the focus of this examination although his ideas have been subject to numerous criticisms and alternative "discourses" (Tisdell, 2012) have emerged in the broader transformative learning field. However, TL theory in general is concerned with human meaning-making, with Mezirow's (e.g., 1978, 1991, 2000) contributions to the literature emphasizing the role of "meaning structures" in human experience and learning. In the preface to his 1991 major work, Mezirow criticizes psychological theories of learning and sets out what in his view is missing from available adult learning theories.

He argues that

> a missing dimension in these psychological theories is meaning—how it is constructed, validated, and reformulated—and the social conditions that influence the ways in which adults make meaning of their experience. (p. xii)

Mezirow's theory of TL is intended to address this lack and gives "meaning structures" a central role in individual experience and learning. They are structures with cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions that bind our thoughts, emotions, acts, and relationships in meaningful ways. As indicated in the introductory section, there are two kinds of meaning structure in Mezirow's theory. One kind is specific and limited. These "meaning schemes" include

particular skills, concepts, beliefs, and values. The other kind of structure is envisaged as containing or as expressed through meaning schemes. These "meaning perspectives" are encompassing or background structures based on deep, powerful, and usually unconscious assumptions. For Mezirow, adult learning is unique in that it can involve the transformation of meaning perspectives under certain conditions. A failure to grapple with new realities in our lives can be a sign that an existing meaning perspective is limited in some way, a possibility that can lead to disorientation and self-questioning as we try to come to terms with the challenging experience. In the process, the taken-for-granted assumptions that constitute meaning perspectives may be forced into awareness where they can become subject to critical appraisal. A complete transformative cycle involves rejecting all or part of an existing meaning perspective and the construction of a new one, a process that can be difficult as we struggle to achieve competence in new ways of being in the world and disturbing in that our identity is at stake.

The social dimension of Mezirow's theory comes to light in the account of the development of initial meaning perspectives. They are constructed in childhood through the process of "socialization" into the common understandings, beliefs, values, perceptions, and rules of the groups to which we belong (family, community, class, society). Mezirow (1978, p. 12) calls this process "formative," and Cranton and Taylor (2012, p. 6) explain that through this process we "uncritically assimilate perspectives from our social world, community and culture." This part of TL theory articulates directly with a practice-based understanding of learning. The trajectory by which the novice newcomer becomes a competent member of a community of practice may be applied to the process by which a young person builds an identity and develops skills and knowledge in their social context. Referring back to Hodkinson and Hodkinson's (2004) distinction between small-scale and large-scale versions of communities of practice, it is possible to view the social world into which

young people are socialized as a large-scale community of practice, and the meaning perspectives that Mezirow says they form in this context as subjective representations of the shared, tacit understandings in terms of which full members understand themselves and the world.

The relationship between individual learner and social context is more nuanced in the case of meaning perspective transformation. Rather than a passive process of assimilation, transformation entails development of a critical stance with respect to context. As Mezirow (1991) explains, transformative learning "involves an enhanced level of awareness of the contexts of one's beliefs and feelings . . ." and a "more critical understanding of how one's social relationships and culture have shaped one's beliefs and feelings" (p. 161)

TL is thus portrayed as a process by which an adult discovers determinants of their thoughts, feelings, and actions that have been at work unconsciously. A key premise of TL theory is that this discovery is made possible through the dysfunction of assumptions that have been shaping an individual's experience, a phase of the TL process Mezirow terms "disorienting dilemma." In the wake of this experience, the learner may engage in self-examination and critical reflection on assumptions, a period in which they can come to realize the limitations of key assumptions and potentially renounce them. This can be a painful time of alienation from familiar ways of being-in-the-world. Coming back to the suggestion that the assimilation of initial meaning perspectives corresponds to an "inbound" trajectory of membership of a large-scale social practice, Mezirow's phases of disorienting dilemma, self-examination, and critical assessment of assumptions can be construed as describing the "outbound" trajectory identified by Wenger (1998). Explaining this kind of trajectory, Wenger (1998) says that "being on the way out" of a community of practice is associated with a special kind of learning, including "seeing the world and

oneself in new ways" (p. 155). He also illustrates this kind of trajectory with reference to the end of childhood, echoing Mezirow's own account of the origins of perspective transformation.

A difference between Wenger's (1998) and Mezirow's (1991) accounts of learning becomes apparent when attention is directed to the aftermath of learning in the outbound mode. Wenger does not elaborate on this phase, or does not register the potential significance of it, whereas Mezirow may be understood as insisting on its significance. TL theory can be seen as a theory of learning that is addressed precisely to the experience of individuals whose participation in a social practice has been disrupted, a form of learning that occurs in a social space conceptually "outside" a community of practice. Mezirow (2000) charted this space with his phases of meaning perspective transformation that begin in a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, and "critical assessment of assumptions," and end with development of "competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships" and reintegration into the social world (p. 22).

The first phases have been briefly discussed and it has been suggested that they are descriptive of an outbound trajectory. In the following phases, Mezirow sees learners as adopting and consolidating new meaning perspectives. Despite the theoretical focus on the individual experience of meaning-making as new perspectives are put into action, Mezirow (1998) argued that in this process "meaning is constructed intersubjectively, rather than by the subject in isolation" (p. 66). This understanding of the process as an inherently social one is borne out in the description of tasks that typify the later phases of TL, with roles and relationships featuring prominently.

Another consequence of Mezirow's focus on the individual dimensions of meaning-making in TL is to leave the social context and significance of the roles, relationships, actions, plans, competence, knowledge, and skills unexplained. Clearly, there is some meaningful connection between them. They are not simply

at hand but already belong to a social context in which they serve the purposes specific to the context. Perhaps a key to understanding the sense of the tasks undertaken by the individual as they work through the later phases of meaning perspective transformation is that they do so by immersing themselves in new social practices. What cannot be denied is that the later phases of TL are descriptive of an inbound trajectory, which Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) portray as a process of adopting roles and building competence in the context of a community of practice.

If Mezirow's (2000) phases of TL can be interpreted as signposting a path that leads out of one social practice and into a new one, TL theory ties in with those elaborations of PBL theory that are at odds with the assumption in the original version of the theory that learning is an intrinsic feature of participation in a single community of practice. The research by Österland (1996), for example, foregrounded the learning potential of trajectories "across" communities of practice, learning that is not founded directly on participation but on the learning potential of difference between multiple practices. From this perspective, TL can also be viewed as a product of learning across practices, or perhaps more accurately, learning *between* practices. The process of TL thus appears as a special form of trajectory. Combining features of Wenger's (1998) outbound and inbound trajectories, a "transformative trajectory" is made possible by the contemporary social reality of multiple careers entailing membership of successive communities of practice. It is a trajectory also made possible by the peculiar learning potential created by movement between practices that exhibit at least some tension or conflict at the level of shared assumptions. A practice-to-practice trajectory may become transformative if one practice must be disavowed prior to entry or as a condition of entry into another. In contrast with examples of learning across practices cited by Fuller (2007), a transformative trajectory is driven by some form of incompatibility between practices that troubles and ultimately changes the learner.

## Social Practices in Examples of Transformative Learning

To illustrate this argument three cases of TL research will be reviewed. In each of these studies TL is the focus, but by drawing attention to the start and/or end points of perspective transformation it is possible to discern the potential role of social practices in the course of learning experiences. The first case is Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves's (1998) study of the experiences of HIV-positive adults. Although the focus of this research was on the *process* of meaning-making in TL, the project involved describing transformed meaning perspectives. The researchers identified three shared characteristics of these perspectives: opportunity to make a meaningful contribution, heightened sensitivity to life, and being of service to others.

As Courtenay et al. (1998) acknowledge, these transformed perspectives are consistent with Mezirow's general characterization of the outcome of meaning perspective transformation. That is, the three characteristics of the participant's transformed perspectives can be regarded as reflecting an empowered sense of self, a critical understanding of influences on one's beliefs and feelings, and the adoption of more functional strategies and resources for taking action. But in light of the specificity of the perspectives developed by the participants, the researchers concluded that "Mezirow's (1991) description of the outcome of a perspective transformation . . . seems too limited a characterization of the transformed perspectives of our participants" (Courtenay et al., 1998, p. 81).

The relevance of the concept of social practices to TL becomes clear as the researchers set out their case for positing a distinct phase of meaning-making as "consolidation of new meaning." They explain that

> nearly all the participants in our study were involved as volunteers or paid employees in AIDS-related and/or other social service or support groups. They regarded this work as their new purpose in life. (Courtenay et al., 1998, p. 80)

They go on to observe that

> we discovered that a large part of the meaning our participants made of their diagnosis, to be of service to other people, reflects the primary mission of the organizations in which most of the respondents were employed or invested their time in some form of volunteer activity. (p. 82)

What Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves touch on here can be construed as evidence that the meaning-making undertaken by their participants is shaped through participation in social practices. These practices are diverse in one sense: They take place in different organizations and groups and in different places. But in another sense there are common undertakings and issues and broad values that characterize such social practices, and the transformed perspectives described by Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves' participants may be regarded as evidence of coalescence around or convergence on a set of common meanings.

My own research into adult learning in the context of Australian vocational education that was introduced earlier offers examples of TL that can be interpreted as trajectories connecting social practices. The multiple case studies found and analyzed several instances of TL, many of them in a program to prepare learners for the challenging occupation of youth work (Hodge, 2010, 2011). One of the research questions was how does TL contribute to vocational outcomes? To address this question, occupational specialists were interviewed to learn whether there were typical assumptions shared by effective practitioners. The aim of this line of inquiry was to determine whether meaning perspective transformation experienced by learners in relevant occupational programs was oriented, at the level of meaning structures, to the occupation in question. This methodology was influenced by Courtenay et al.'s (1998) study above, which produced descriptions of transformed meaning perspectives.

Five specialists were interviewed for the youth work case and each of them affirmed that fundamental assumptions common to effective youth workers could be identified. One of the occupational assumptions described by all of the

specialists was that *environment is the main influence on young people's behavior*. As one of the specialists explained,

> Young people, through no fault of their own, have found themselves in need of services. They may be doing things that are their fault, like committing crime and stuff, but they've found themselves in need of services from being a child in a dysfunctional family, in some way. I think that would be a common belief [of effective youth workers], that these kids have not brought it on themselves.

Some of the specialists contrasted this assumption of youth workers with an assumption held in society more broadly:

> I think the general public might have an idea, if you asked, "Well, that's their own fault, they just need to behave," or something like that . . . What we find about society is most of society actually believes that people are the authors of their own demise really, and if you hold that belief, if you think like that, then you would find it very hard I think to work within [the youth work] system, or to work effectively within this kind of system.

This occupational assumption proved highly relevant to the direction of TL undergone by learners in the youth work program. The curriculum and pedagogy of the program happened to promote the message that environment produced challenging behaviors in some young people, and it was coming to terms with this fundamental message that characterized the TL described by the learners in the program. For example, one of them said,

> I was just learning that these kids aren't learning any good, they're not around good people . . . [T]he environments that these kids are growing up in, they're learning nothing, they're not learning goodness. You can't expect a kid to know it if they've never learnt it. That's what I'm learning.

Another learner explained that before the program he was "always a fairly strict-moral sort of person" who would "condemn" any individual who "broke the rules." He described his own learning in this way:

> I guess where my change occurred was that I actually went back and said there is a reason for it [the behavior of young people]—what I actually did was went back and said, "Yes, there is a reason for it." And so I think the biggest thing for me was, the change was going back and understanding why things have happened.

In these examples of transformative learning, participation in a vocational program to prepare learners for the youth work occupation fostered the adoption of an assumption common to occupational practitioners. This assumption was at odds with assumptions about the causes of behavior in young people held by the learners and society at large. Learners entered the program with these same assumptions that were rejected as learners came to terms with the realities of the lives of young people in trouble. The learners found themselves withdrawing from the social practice of which they were part as they entered another, and TL was the character of this experience.

Mezirow's (1978) original research into learning in women's reentry programs presents a third example of TL that may be better understood with reference to social practices. Mezirow's research, which took place during the mid-1970s, focused on the phenomenon of women's reentry programs—diverse community college programs designed for women seeking entry into education or employment after extended time away from such pursuits. The concept of meaning perspective transformation emerged from this project. Although Mezirow acknowledges that the programs he studied were mostly developed for and patronized by middle-class women, he was convinced that the phenomenon of perspective transformation was not limited to this group, but rather amounted to a "generic process unique to development in the adult years" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 55). According to Mezirow (1978),

> The process of perspective transformation begins when a woman becomes

> aware of the ways cultural assumptions and their psychological consequences have placed their stamp upon her . . . The women's movement has created a supportive climate for this kind of personal reappraisal by publicizing the constraints upon personal development, autonomy, and self-determination imposed by such stereotypes and by providing new role models. (p. 11)

The participants in Mezirow's research underwent perspective transformation after enrolling in programs that embodied, in various ways, the values and assumptions of the burgeoning women's movement, and deployed techniques that raised awareness of the norms of traditional women's roles and alternatives articulated by the women's movement. The participants were largely White and middle-class and were responding to a middle-class cultural shift when they entered the trajectory that brought them to the reentry programs. Evans (1997) illustrates this shift by drawing on the experiences of Sophy Burnham, a journalist assigned to do a story on the women's movement. Burnham initially believed that the movement was of the "lunatic fringe," but conceded that

> within a week I was so upset, I could hardly focus my ideas . . . I thought I had come to terms with my life; but every relationship—husband, child, father, mother —was brought into question. (Evans, 1997, p. 289)

Evans (1997) adds that "by the end she was a convert" (p. 289). For Evans, "The power of the women's movement lay in its capacity to stimulate such deep rethinking, to pose, *as a problem*, concepts such as femininity and motherhood and relationships previously taken for granted" (p. 289). The "consciousness raising group" was central to the spread of the women's movement and a powerful technique for introducing women to its values and goals:

> The central organizing tool of the women's liberation movement, the small consciousness- raising group, proved an effective mechanism for movement building. Within such groups, women discovered that their experiences were not unique but part of a larger pattern, and they rediscovered female

community. (pp. 289-290)

Mezirow found that after entering programs that espoused the values of the women's movement and used techniques such as consciousness-raising, the research participants became aware of, evaluated, and mostly rejected traditional roles. They made the shift to new roles modeled in the reentry programs. These roles involved adopting a critical, empowered stance that politicized the participants. Mezirow analyzes these experiences and discovers a process by which personal meaning structures are challenged, scrutinized and questioned, and potentially overhauled if a new meaning structure takes its place.

Considered in terms of the concept of social practices, the women in Mezirow's study can be viewed as participants in the large scale practice of the mid-20th-century American middle-class who have imbibed unsettling messages about the soundness of social practices of which they are members, and who enter, along with many of their contemporaries, reentry programs. Once in these programs, the participants are exposed to an alternative social practice that claims their allegiance through immersion in specific activities and shared understandings. On this reading of the experiences of the women in Mezirow's research, Mezirow himself emerges as a theorist of the pedagogy of the women's movement who failed to fully comprehend the role of the social practices the women were moving from and to.

## Conclusion

In this article, the attempt has been made to respond to the theoretical questions prompted by my research by drawing out complementarities between TL and PBL learning theories. TL theory takes several forms (Tisdell, 2012), including Mezirow's (1978, 1991, 2000) influential version. The focus of his theory is on the experiences of those who are provoked by life challenges to question themselves and the deep assumptions that give meaning to experience.

Mezirow argues that meaning structures shape experience and that meaning perspective transformation is the generic key to understanding adult learning. The argument advanced in this article entails construing meaning perspectives as representations of the tacit understandings that structure social practices, and meaning perspective transformation as a process of movement from one social practice and into another. Wenger's (1998) outbound and inbound trajectories map to experiences typical of the beginning and end, respectively, of the cycle of meaning perspective transformation described by Mezirow (2000). TL emerges as a special kind of learning trajectory between practices. The theorization of different scales of practice by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) facilitates an understanding of practice-to-practice trajectories that join the broad social practices into which children, for example, are socialized, to the practices of, for example, a social movement, occupation, or workplace. What is distinctive about a transformative trajectory is that, for the individual on it, there are tensions or conflict at the level of the tacit understandings of each practice, which force them to renounce the assumptions of one social practice before or in order to embrace the assumptions of another. Incompatibility at the level of tacit understandings of social practices is a condition of the transformative potential of the "inter-practice" space.

This argument raises a host of questions, of which four will be spelled out here. First, there is the unresolved theoretical issue concerning the relationship between the critical stance Mezirow believes is carried over into the post transformation sphere and the nature of learning characteristic of entry into a community of practice. A dominant theme in TL theory is that criticality and autonomy are the enduring yield of TL. In terms of PBL theory, an outbound trajectory does open the possibility for the learner to consciously experience some form of critical distancing, but an inbound trajectory would seem to require a different stance, perhaps one of faith in the ultimate value of participation without immediate and explicit comprehension of the purposes of

the practice. Mezirow distinguished between the two stances, terming the uncritical form of participation "organic solidarity" (typified by the uncritical assimilation of meaning perspectives in childhood or through a "conversion" experience) and the posttransformation, critical form of "contractual solidarity" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 191). A question for future research, then, would be whether individuals who experience inbound trajectories more than once enter social practices with a different stance to the child, the convert or the apprentice. Is their legitimate peripheral participation of a different quality? Can the critical stance conceptualized as contractual solidarity be maintained by the newcomer immersed in a new practice, or is criticality confined to the outbound component (i.e., the initial phases) of perspective transformation?

A second question is the relationship between meaning perspectives and social practices. A central premise of the argument of this article is that the concept of meaning perspectives applies to the tacit, unconscious, shared understandings that underpin practices. Because practice theory tends to eschew dualistic accounts of experience (i.e., accounts that assume an ontological difference between subjective meaning structures and social context), there are few conceptual resources available in this literature for marking out the subjective dimensions of participation. However, Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) has elaborated the ties between the nature of individual participation and the possibilities of practice with the concept of "habitus." This concept refers to social practice as internalized in an embodied, primarily unconscious representation. Attention to the relationship between meaning perspectives and social practices, potentially starting with Bourdieu's notion of habitus, may also facilitate understanding of learning and identity formation across practices. The individual, who moves between practices, whether between compatible or incompatible ones, must carry a trace of already experienced practices, which prompts the question of the nature of individual-level representation of practices. Does the concept of meaning perspective serve

as a conceptualization of this representation? What is the theoretical relationship between meaning perspectives and habitus? Can the concept of habitus help extend our understanding of meaning struc- tures in TL?

A third issue concerns the influence of different scales of practice on learning between practices. The argument of this article has stressed Hodkinson and Hodkinson's (2004) distinction between large scale and small scale communities of practice and has been illustrated with social practices ranging in scale from a whole social class (e.g., the White, American middle class of the early 1970s identified in Mezirow's, 1978, research), to the practices common to organizations and groups that Courtenay et al.'s (1998) participants joined, to the more tight-knit workplace group studied by Wenger (1998). A question for research here is whether and in what way the scale of social practices influence the learning trajectory between them. Fuller (2007) analyzes learning across similar scale practices (e.g., workplaces), while the cases drawn from the TL literature mainly describe trajectories from large scale to smaller scale practices. Does the learning generated by movement between large scale practices (e.g., between nations, cultures, classes, occupations) differ from movement between small scale practices (e.g., from one workplace or institution to another), and if so, how? Does movement between practices of different scales (e.g., from a large scale to small scale) result in different kinds of learning?

Finally, a key premise of my argument is that different social practices can be experienced as in tension or conflict at the level of tacit understandings. The concept of a transformative trajectory assumes that an individual on it is troubled by assumptions characteristic of one practice and shifts their commitment to the assumptions of another. At a general level, research into the influence of prior membership of social practices on the learning trajectory of entry into and identity-building in new practices would be helpful for unraveling how, in Wenger's (1998, p. 155) words, "a form of participation

enables what happens next." Such research would be helpful for understanding the conditions of a transformative trajectory, potentially throwing light on the relationship between the development of critical awareness of the assumptions of one social practice and initial exposure to a new practice. The conceptual framework of practice theory helps focus the question of whether TL is driven by awareness of the limitations of the tacit understandings in one social practice or by a realization of the promise of understandings implicit in an alternative practice, or indeed whether there is a dialectic connecting the two possible motives.

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