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Nancy K. Franz, Dr., *Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University*

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Adult Education Theories: Informing Cooperative Extension's Transformation

Abstract
As the largest adult education institution in America, Cooperative Extension should ground organizational operations in adult education theory. This connection with theory is especially important as Extension systems work towards organizational transformation to create more participatory and democratic learning. Adult education theories of transformative learning and critical reflection from a critical theory perspective are especially pertinent to inform this type of transformation. This requires that Extension create opportunities for learners to experience disorienting dilemmas, critically reflect on their assumptions, and facilitate how to learn not just what to learn.

Nancy Franz
Professor/Extension Specialist
Extension Program and Curriculum Development
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia
nfranz@vt.edu

The Cooperative Extension System is the largest institution of adult education in America (Griffith in Peters & Jarvis, 1991). Extension, like many organizations, is working towards transformation to better meet public needs (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 1999; Spanier, 2000). The call for change focuses on transformation or profound changes in the organization to move from a rural, expert-based service institution to one that more democratically develops a wider variety of human capacity to make Extension and its land-grant partners more accessible, meaningful, and accountable (Peters, Jordan, Adamek, & Alter, 2005).

Cooperative Extension has attempted a variety of transformations over the years in response to concerns from stakeholders about effectiveness. However, changes such as staff clustering, urban programming, and enhancing staff credentials have resulted in limited success. Grounding Extension's transformation in theory could help ensure successful engagement of the institution with adult educators, learners, and supporters. The connection between theory and practice is summed up by one scholar when she states, "higher education has a responsibility to society, not only to fulfill the traditional role of creating and disseminating knowledge but also to contribute to creating a more equitable and just society (Tisdell et al. in Wilson & Hayes, 2001, p. 149)." This should be the goal of Extension's transformation informed by adult education theory.

Theories of Adult Education

No clear consensus exists on the specific theoretical base of adult education. However, adult education scholars group theories into three general themes--positivist (third person view), interpretive (second person view), and critical (first person view) (Briton, 1996; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Peters & Jarvis, 1991). Theories that I believe best support the transformation of Extension are grounded in the critical perspective focused on power, ethics, lived experience, and emancipation.

Critical theory expands on the positivist view of adult education related to technical or skills-based knowledge (Wilson & Hayes, 2000). In particular, Mezirow's transformation theory of adult learning and Brookfield's theory of critical reflection in adult education should inform successful transformation of the Cooperative Extension System. These theories can increase creative thinking and work, provide fresh approaches, and overall, improve our ability to provide more democratic learning environments.

Transformative Learning Theory

Jack Mezirow, the father of transformative learning theory states, "transformative learning for emancipation education is the business of all adult education (1990, p. 357)." This psychological approach to adult learning developed by Mezirow in 1978 inspired many in the women's movement and focuses on deep changes in how adults see themselves and their world (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow defines transformative learning as:

> The process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide actions (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7).

Simply, transformative learning replaces a point of view or mind-set with one that is more developed or mature (Merriam, 2004). The goal of this learning theory is learner empowerment through critical reflection for a more participatory learning society (Cranton, 1994). This theory suggests a triggering event catalyzes the transformative learning process. This learning process requires thinking deeply about assumptions that change due to the triggering event. The learner constructs new meaning of their experience from the new context created by the triggering event and through conversation with others to assess and justify their assumptions. This transformative process results in reflective action from changes in life experience (Mezirow, 2000).

Mezirow suggests a 10-step process for transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000):

1. Experience a disorienting dilemma
2. Undergo self-examination
3. Conduct a deep assessment of personal role assumptions and alienation created by new roles
4. Share and analyze personal discontent and similar experiences with others
5. Explore options for new ways of acting
6. Build competence and self-confidence in new roles
7. Plan a course of action
8. Acquire knowledge and skills for action
9. Try new roles and assess feedback

10. Reintegrate into society with a new perspective

Implications for Extension Transformation

Transformative learning theory implications for Extension include the following.

- Interdisciplinary problem solving could more fully guide Extension's transformation rather than just dissemination of content or a single discipline approach to problem solving.
- The theory shows the dynamic power of group transformation for change (Hart in Mezirow, 1990). Personal transformation experienced in a group may catalyze organizational change more effectively than change initiated or catalyzed by an organization's leaders. Group transformation can build strong identity and solidarity across organizational units and levels in a turbulent environment (Franz, 2005).
- This theory validates the role of the Extension worker as a helper and facilitator of learning rather than just a teacher of information learning (Baumgartner, 2001). This helping role is becoming more central to Extension's niche in solving complex public problems.
- Transformative learning theory includes applied and participatory research, consistent with Extension's transformation to support more democratic learning environments through knowledge co-creation among faculty, field staff, and stakeholders.
- The theory reinforces autonomy with accountability as transformed learners commit to monitoring progress with each other. This commitment to accountability supports organizational transformation to better communicate the public value of Cooperative Extension (Franz, 2003).

Theory Limitations for Transformation

- Shortcomings of this theory for the Extension context of organizational transformation include the following.
- The theory does not address the role of established power relationships in the learning process, yet transformation often disrupts power relationships (McDonald, Cervero, & Courtenay, 1999). Because Extension work involves a broad range of power relationships, many of which are implicit, this could be troublesome for organizational transformation. Issues could be raised about whom Extension serves, who makes that decision, and how organizational policy is determined and by whom.
- Few studies have examined the relationship between individual transformation and organizational transformation (Franz, 2005). Even though one study found a link between individual and organizational change, it cannot be generalized that transformation of individuals will transform Extension or vice versa.
- Many Extension staff and stakeholders may not want, or may not be ready, to change their perspective. Many individuals believe instrumental (skill based) learning is the goal of Extension work, not transformative learning.
- The transformative learning process is not as linear as Mezirow suggests and may be difficult for educators to orchestrate (Taylor in Wilson & Hayes, 2000).
- Transformative learning processes require higher levels of cognitive functioning that most adults do not achieve (Merriman, 2004).
- Mezirow does not address the role of emotions in transformative learning. Extension leaders know these emotions can be hard to manage. Robertson states that "the field neither adequately prepares nor supports adult educators to manage the dynamics of helping relationships or the dynamics of transformative learning within the context of those relationships (1996, p. 44)."

- The theory relies heavily on rational discourse, difficult to achieve in turbulent environments common to Extension work.

- Transformative learning requires a safe environment to develop trust, an essential element for transformation in groups (Tisdell et al. in Wilson & Hayes, 2000). Providing a safe space could prove challenging for Extension, with decentralized staff and disciplinary, political, and other divisions and differences amongst staff.

- The sustainability of the transformed perspective requires continued support from others. The decentralized nature of Extension may make this hard to achieve. Group accountability could also run counter to the autonomy currently valued by many staff.

- Mezirow's original transformative learning theory did not address the variety of ways that people learn. Mezirow has since recognized that intuition, empathy, relationships, and other forms of learning are important for transformational learning (2000).

Critical Reflection Theory

One Extension administrator suggests organizational effectiveness requires the organization be a reflective learning system (Applebee in Wilson & Hayes, 2000). Although transformative learning might accomplish this, Extension systems could create transformation solely through critical reflection. However, Stephan Brookfield points out that critical reflection is not synonymous with transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Reflection most often relies only on learning from experience and not an in-depth transformation process (Cranton, 1996; Munoz-Chrobak, 2001).

Brookfield defines critical reflection as "reflecting on the assumptions underlying ours and other's ideas and actions, and contemplating alternative ways of thinking and living (1987, p. 87)." This type of reflection requires being self-aware (Wilson & Hayes, 2000), making sense of experience (Garrison, 1992), deconstructing and reconstructing meaning in life (Ewert & Grace, 2000), critique of premises and ideologies (Brookfield in Mezirow, 2000), and principled thinking (Mezirow, 1998).

Critical reflection focuses on emancipation and autonomy of the learner to gain better control of rapid change in the environment connected to their private lives and public issues (Brookfield, 1987). One study proposes critical reflection practiced by educators results in personal growth, increased professionalism, increased democracy and justice in the learning environment, increased appreciation for complexities of teaching, better meeting the needs of diverse learners, and increased collaboration among educators (Munoz-Chrobak, 2001).

The practice of critical reflection requires a community of peers, uncovers commonly held and possibly false assumptions, and is dependent on context and personal experiences. This type of reflection is social action that includes imagining and exploring alternatives to current assumptions. Those who reflect critically are self-aware and often become more skeptical of the world around them.

Brookfield's phases for successful critical reflection include:

1. Trigger event

2. Appraisal of assumptions

3. Exploration of alternatives to current assumptions

4. Developing alternative perspectives

5. Integration of new perspectives into daily life

Implications for Extension Transformation

Critical reflection theory has implications for Extension transformation, including the following.

- It provides a rationale and method for deeply examining assumptions for organizational change and the individual's role in it.
- This theory supports a flexible organizational change process based on context.
- Critical reflection may encourage creativity and innovation, important for successful organization change.
- The theory promotes serious thinking and debate about an organization's traditions and history to determine what no longer works and to explore new ways to be more effective.
- The theory supports the use of questioning, critical incidents, scenario creation, and critical analysis methods already well established as tools for organizational transformation.
- Critical reflection can promote a problem-solving process useful for addressing the complexities of change.
- Groups that engage in critical reflection could be more inclusive, learn as a group, raise their awareness of change issues, and be collaborative and democratic in their approach to the change process.
- Critical thinking can support individual and group processes necessary to make organizational change successful.
- Critical reflection is most common to Western culture and may not appeal to other cultures (Mezirow, 2004).

Theory Limitations for Transformation

Limitations of this theory for Extension include the following.

- Extension staff tend not to reflect on their work, let alone reflect critically. The work environment rewards doing, rather than reflection. The decentralized nature of the system also hinders reflection. Staff may not believe reflection is linked to personal or organizational effectiveness.
- Genuine critical reflection can make visible hidden agendas that could negatively influence the depth, sustainability, and even the possibility of organizational change.
- Extension funders (the public) may prefer a focus on activities and programs rather than reflection for use of their tax dollars.
- Discourse that supports critical reflection in Extension is difficult with few mechanisms in place to reflect and little tradition of critical reflection for most staff and stakeholders. Most staff are not trained to facilitate or participate in critical reflection, either individually or in groups.
- Challenging assumptions through reflection in a publicly funded organization can be risky and messy. Uneven support from some Extension stakeholders reinforces the status quo instead of risk taking.
- Critical theorists do not suggest approaches for dealing with the ramifications resulting from the struggles and decisions that a critically reflective organization could experience as part of change (Tisdell et al. in Wilson & Hayes, 2000).

Putting Theory into Practice

Cooperative Extension staff should draw from both transformative learning and critical reflection theories as they work to enhance personal and organizational effectiveness. Implications for practice from both theories include

the following.

- Field educators should focus more intently on processing educational experiences with learners by including time for critical reflection on assumptions about content and the learning process.
- Interdisciplinary issues education and other approaches to programming should be used to stretch staff and learners and provide opportunities for disorienting dilemmas and self-assessment.
- Administrators must support a variety of ways of learning preferred by Extension staff and clientele.
- Staff should provide opportunities for learners to more fully guide their own learning to better match the learner's needs, including offering a variety of delivery methods from electronic learning, to print material and workshops.
- Staff should provide structured reflection time with learners and serve as a learning helper rather than just an expert to create a more participatory learning environment.
- Professional development must be a high priority for paid and volunteer staff to rethink and retool their work as change takes place with learners and the learning environment.
- Learners should be directly involved in developing, implementing, and evaluating learning experiences to encourage critical reflection between teachers and learners, and realignment of programs.
- Administrators and educators need to remove impediments that prevent critical reflection on assumptions and learner's voices from being heard.
- Staff should critically reflect on assumptions about programs and educational processes with each other to review, renew, refresh, broaden, and deepen their impact.
- Educators should facilitate experiential activities that help learners think about and discuss their assumptions and explore alternatives.
- Staff job descriptions, orientation, and performance reviews should be redesigned to emphasize learners and staff examining and changing their assumptions, views, and practices as appropriate.
- The organization should change the language it uses to describe educational processes and program impact to include transformation, triggering events or disorienting dilemmas, reflection, critical reflection, and questioning assumptions.

Conclusion

As the largest adult education institution in America, Cooperative Extension should ground organizational operations in adult education theory. This connection with theory becomes especially important as Extension systems throughout the country work towards transforming themselves to better meet the needs of adults they serve.

Adult education theories of transformative learning and critical reflection are especially pertinent to inform successful transformation because they focus on developing more participatory learning. These theories suggest that Extension should create opportunities for learners to experience disorienting dilemmas, critically reflect on their assumptions, and facilitate how to learn not just what to learn.

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