Sharing AIDS: Cultural Learning in Communities of Practice

Donovan Plumb and Barbara Berringer
Mount Saint Vincent University

Recently, Baumgartner (2002), Courtenay et al. (2000) and Courtenay at al. (1998) have described instances of transformational learning in HIV-positive individuals. Working from the premise that “the prospect of death at an early age challenges assumptions and values about the meaning of life” (Courtenay et al., 2000, p. 103), these researchers observe that HIV/AIDS appears to be a powerful stimulus for stable, long-term transformational learning in afflicted individuals. Despite Baumgartner’s (2002) contention that social interactions play a key role in the transformational learning process in HIV/AIDS individuals, these researchers still follow Jack Mezirow and posit transformational learning as a process that occurs “in the head” of individuals. In the following paper, we draw on research that we have conducted into the indigenous learning processes of people impacted and affected by HIV/AIDS in Nova Scotia to criticize the individualistic tendencies of Jack Mezirow’s transformational learning theory. We contend that a “cultural theory of learning” that depicts human learning as an intersubjective process that transpires in communities of practice provides a far better basis for understanding the learning of people impacted and affected by HIV/AIDS than transformational learning theory.

Transformational Learning Occurs in the Head

According to Mezirow (1991), as we pass through life, we experience and make sense of the world based on a coherent meaning perspective (frame of reference) that we acquire through experience and socialization (including acquiring a language). “A meaning perspective,” he contends, “is a habitual set of expectations that constitutes an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic models and that serves as a (usually tacit) belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience” (p. 42). In Mezirow’s view, a meaning perspective is a personal attribute. It exists in our heads and acts as a framework for the incorporation of new ideas. “[M]eaning exists within ourselves,” he contends, even though “the personal meanings we attribute to our experience are acquired and validated through human interaction and communication” (p. xiv). Based on this view of cognition as a process that transpires in the mind, he relates that “learning may be understood as the process of using prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (p. 6). A transformational learning event takes place inside a person when she or he critically reflects on the premises of her or his meaning perspective and revises it in a way that is “developmentally progressive” to the extent “not only that it is more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative of experience but also that it is permeable (open) to alternative perspectives so that inclusivity, discrimination and integration continually increase” (p. 156).

Mezirow has fielded criticisms of his transformational learning theory, all basically concerned with the same issue: Mezirow’s theory, many commentators have observed, is
primarily psychological in focus and does not pay sufficient attention to the broader social and cultural contexts of adult learning. Collard and Law (1989), Griffin (1987), and Hart (1990), for instance, all contend that, despite his incorporation of Jürgen Habermas’s critical social theory, Mezirow does not acknowledge the different ways actual social and cultural contexts constrain the learning process. Clark and Wilson (1991) suggest that the problem with transformational learning theory is that in, “locating perspective transformation within the individual and predicated upon humanistic assumptions of a decisive, unified self, [it] fails to explore the constitutive relationship between individuals and the sociocultural, political, and historical contexts in which they are situated” (p. 90). Tennant (1993) argues that “the type of developmental shift implied by perspective transformation, which is more fundamentally transformative [than normal developmental events] … involves some level of social critique” (p. 34). Newman (1993) contrasts perspective transformation with Paulo Freire’s notion of conscientization, suggesting that, “[c]onscientization involves a group of people looking beyond their personal histories to the collective history of their group, their culture and their class…. Perspective transformation appears to focus on an individual examining her or his own personal experience” (p. 229).

In each case, Mezirow offers the same defence. He contends that he is deeply aware of the importance of social and cultural factors impacting adult learning and he observes that critically reflecting on “sociolinguistic codes” can result in perspective transformation that “leads logically to challenging the dominant ideologies and, when feasible, to taking social action to change the system” (Mezirow, 1994a, p. 232). He asks us to remember that he is “trying to delineate a generic model of adult learning to guide adult educators” (Mezirow, 1994b, p. 243). Transformational learning theory, Mezirow claims, is not incompatible at all with social action (in fact, very often, it forms the very basis of social action); however, it is not reducible to social action, either. Transformational learning can result from reflecting critically on psychological or epistemological “codes” as well as sociolinguistic codes: it can result in changes in personality or in knowledge without always impacting the surrounding social or cultural context.

What Mezirow leaves unexamined, though, is his depiction of learning as a process that transpires in the head of individual humans. For him, people are separate entities who, while they might impact each other’s interpretations of the world, do not need to be present to each other to learn. Learning, for Mezirow is not a deeply shared or intrinsically cultural process: people can stimulate each other’s thinking, can offer each other interpretations to help makes sense of things, can challenge each other’s points of view but, in the end, it is the individual mind that makes sense of the world and that changes during the learning process.

It is our contention, however, that this individualistic view of learning is deeply problematic. Meaning, we contend, is not the product or possession of an individual mind. Rather, meaning is something we make and hold together. It is an agreement that dynamically unfolds in human intersubjectivities and is never the accomplishment of just one person. It is what emerges and then continually unfolds when people link up. Learning is not something that exists outside of our relationships with each other. It is not you or I that learn. We learn! Learning is the effect of our relationship.
A Cultural Theory of Learning

This view of learning, not as a process that transpires in the head of a person, but rather as the state of our brains being linked together in an ongoing process of negotiating shared understandings, has its roots in sociocultural psychology. In contrast with more individualist and reductionistic variants of behaviourist and cognitivist psychology, sociocultural psychology is thoroughly emergentist in its approach to phenomena like personality (Valsiner, 1998; 2000a; 2000b), cognition (Cole, 1996; Hutchins, 1995; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1998), and, significantly, learning (Tomasello, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999).

Michael Tomasello (1999), relates that the emergent human capacity for shared attention (around 40,000 years ago for humans in general, around nine months of age for contemporary human beings) enabled humans, for the first time, to organize themselves as an intersubjective learning entity capable of negotiating the meaning of common experiences and of producing shared cultural artifacts. In the process of negotiating meaning, individuals constitute both themselves (their identities) and their cultural “communities of practice.” They also produce a capacity for “practical” action (a coordinated “body” response to physical, social or cultural challenges). According to Tomasello, the historical emergence of our capacity for cultural learning made it possible, for the first time, for people to communicate shared understandings, and, importantly, to weave ever more complex cultural patterns over time. He characterizes this “accumulative” learning capacity as “the great ratchet effect of culture” (p. 5).

Sociocultural psychologist, Jaan Valsiner (1998) adds additional layers to Tomasello’s notion of cultural learning by helping us understand more deeply how “human personality is a cultural process – first, at the level of the constant construction of personal culture by the developing person, and, second, as a way of reflecting upon one’s self as socially suggested by the collective culture” (p. 40). According to Valsiner, personality emerges as the result of a co-constructive process that transpires between the emerging person and their surrounding culture.

Etienne Wenger (1998) asserts boldly that the kind of learning that makes humans unique is not a process that happens inside the individual (a passive act of knowledge consumption). He contends, rather, that learning is a process of “social participation” in communities of practice in which people negotiate and renegotiate the meaning of shared experiences in an ongoing, culture-producing cycle. Learning occurs when people in community draw on a “shared repertoire” of reified meanings to negotiate new understandings that become the basis for coordinated actions (practices), senses of self (identities) and senses of belonging (solidarity). All of these unfolding attributes of intersubjectivity (meaning, practice, identity and solidarity) become the basis for subsequent moments of learning.

According to cultural psychologist, Edwin Hutchins (1995), cognitive theorists (like Mezirow) all too often make important category mistakes in their depictions of thinking and learning. For one thing, they often mistake the properties of a sociocultural system for the properties of an individual. “The firm drawing of the inside/outside boundary creates the impression that individual minds operate in isolation and encourages us to mistake the properties of complex sociocultural systems for the properties of individual minds” (p. 355). For another thing, they often make the mistake of overattribution. In this case, “when one commits to the notion that all intelligence [or learning] is inside the inside/outside boundary, one is forced to cram inside everything that is required to produce the observed behaviors” (p. 355).
These, we contend, are precisely the mistakes Mezirow makes with his theory. While we believe that learning processes do change meanings, these processes are not the property of the individual mind. Rather, cultural learning processes transpire in human intersubjectivities.

Learning about HIV/AIDS in the Meshwork

Understanding the extent and rapidity of cultural learning, particularly those instances when meanings undergo rapid transformation, requires that we look closely, not at what is happening in individual heads but what is happening in communities of practice. A two-year research project, funded by Health Canada's HIV/AIDS Community-Based Research Program, provided the opportunity to do just that. Researchers from Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax, Nova Scotia), AIDS Coalition of Nova Scotia (Halifax, Nova Scotia), and Sharp Advice Needle Exchange (Sydney, Nova Scotia) investigated the indigenous learning processes of people impacted and affected by HIV/AIDS in Nova Scotia (Plumb, 2001; 2003). Using a community-based research process, researchers conducted 60 interviews, held 3 focus groups and gathered extensive archival data to learn more about the ways people in communities of practice learn about HIV/AIDS. As we gained a clearer sense of what constituted communities of practice, we began to witness the extent of their presence in the history of the HIV/AIDS movement in Nova Scotia. From the very first moments of the disease’s entry onto the Nova Scotia stage, communities of practice were what confronted it. Every interview contained stories of people coming together for varied reasons and for varied periods of time. Some communities of practice came and went as their particular raison d’être ceased to be. Others have continued on, gaining and losing members, changing their ways of being and evolving their purpose.

For cultural theorists of learning, meaning is the historical effect of interpersonal relationships; communities of practice provide the context for these interpersonal relationships and for negotiation of shared understandings. Our data provided extensive evidence of the never-ending negotiation amongst people within their varied communities of practice. As the history of their shared engagement began to lengthen, people began to collectively constitute an increasingly complex web of shared understandings about the meaning of different things and events. Meanings constituted in the past are mobilized to help negotiate the meaning of current experiences. New meanings are created and old meanings are perpetuated or transformed. This new state of understanding then forms the basis of the next moment of shared experience. Indigenous learning processes enable people in communities of practice to make sense of their experiences with HIV/AIDS, to develop solidarity with each other in their struggle to confront HIV/AIDS issues, to forge identities that can withstand the varied assaults of the disease, and to produce effective and meaningful practices to address the proliferating challenges of the disease. The learning bonds that weave people together in the meshwork also enable people to overcome cultural differences and to develop effective coordinated responses to the local eco-social challenges of HIV/AIDS.
HIV/AIDS Transforming Perspectives

By employing the lens of a cultural theory of learning for our project’s examination of indigenous learning processes within the communities of practice of persons affected by HIV/AIDS, we are able to shine a light on the inadequacies of an individualistic interpretation of transformational learning. The limits and repercussions of Mezirow’s theory are clearly revealed in the ways transformational learning theory has been explored in relation to HIV/AIDS. In an extended study of the impact of HIV/AIDS on adult learning, Courtenay et al. (1998), Courtenay et al. (2000) and Baumgartner (2002) interviewed 18 (in early research) and 11 (in later research) HIV-positive people to assess the extent that HIV-positive diagnosis constituted a “disorienting dilemma” that could precipitate a transformational learning event and, in follow-up research, to assess the “outcomes of transformational learning over time” (Courtenay et al., 2000, p. 103).

Consistent with Mezirow’s theoretical perspective, the focus of this extended study was on the individual as transformational learner. The study methodology, while qualitative (in that it attempted to engage participants in a process of communicating the meaning of their experiences to researchers), did not expressly address the historical or sociocultural contexts of HIV/AIDS of the individuals who were interviewed. It did not examine the immediate or extended communities of practice of which the interviewees were members.

While in the second phase, researchers examined the extent to which transformational learning produced lasting changes, it was only in the third stage of this research study that any serious wondering was done about the actual learning process that had produced perspective transformations. Baumgartner does observe that, aside from their HIV-positive diagnosis, critical reflection plays a key part in this transformational process. Dialogue, it turns out, is an important stimulus and guide for the reflective process that finally overturns old perspectives in favour of new one. Importantly, she also reports that “social interaction transformed participants from frightened, stigmatized individuals to empowered, confident people…. By talking with others, people realized that they were not alone, that they had control over the disease, and that they could change society as a group” (pp. 54-55).

Baumgartner’s final admittance that social interactions amongst people seem to have something to do with the process of transformational learning reveals the destructive power of Mezirow’s transformational theory to suppress critical investigation of the sociocultural learning processes that produce transformational change. Despite her admission that social relations seem important, Baumgartner does not pursue a sociocultural analysis. She does not examine the nature or the histories of the intersubjectivities within which people purportedly experienced their perspective transformations. She does not examine the ways learning in these intersubjectivities was either enabled or constrained. Nor does she examine the ways communities of practice might sustain rapidly evolving, autocatalytic cultural learning processes that might produce very different ways of living with HIV/AIDS.

What is particularly important, though, in framing transformational learning in individualistic terms, is that Baumgartner, like all transformational learning theorists before her, places adult educators, themselves on the “outside” of the learning process. If learning happens in a person’s head, the most we can do as adult educators is to try to create circumstances to influence this process. In Baumgartner’s terms, adult educators can engage in activities like “facilitating transformational learning experiences in the classroom,” “creating situations that move students towards a broader, more inclusive worldview,” “challenging student’s
preconceived notions about themselves and the world,” and “assist[ing] learners in acting on their new meaning schemes” (p. 58). The huge problem with all this, though, is that, transformational theory encourages adult educators to see themselves on the outside of a learning process that takes place in a learner’s head. It undermines their capacity to see themselves as co-participants in an intersubjective process of cultural learning in which people gather in their communities of practice to make sense of HIV/AIDS.

In the HIV/AIDS context, understanding the cultural nature of human learning is particularly important. It is only within integrated and vital communities of practice that the deepest implications, the most effective practices and the most resilient identities can be achieved. Rather than ending with the view that “challenging students’ preconceived notions about themselves and the world is a worthy goal of educators” (Baumgartner, 2002), our research suggests that sharing in the process of making sense of HIV/AIDS demands we attend to the intersubjective conditions of human learning within communities of practice.

References


