

Promoting Perspective Transformation in the Economics Classroom

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Synopsis

Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory suggests that adults operate with semi-fixed perspectives and scripts which have developed over time and help the individual make sense of their world as they move from one life experience to the next. These "points of view" and "habits of mind" form meaning schemes which may be updated or revised when they become ineffective in allowing the individual to interpret and integrate their experiences with their expectations. This is the phenomenon of adult learning.

What is Perspective Transformation?

Perspective transformation is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings (Mezirow, 1981, p. 6).

Implications for Higher Education Economics Instruction

Mezirow considers three types of adult learning:

1. Technical learning related to objects and work – *Instrumental action*
2. Practical learning related to social interactions – *Communicative action*, and
3. Emancipatory learning related to an individual's power and agency – *Perspective transformation*

Although economic theory and application involves instrumental action (often concerning phenomenon involving communicative action), economics has the potential to empower individuals through perspective transformation because it can challenge points-of-view and provoke changes to an individual's meaning schemes in ways other more technical disciplines may not.

Because economic theories can apply so broadly and across so many areas of public interest and concern, instructors in economics should consider to what extent promoting individual agency should be a part of their teaching philosophy.

Where to Focus?

Hoggan (2016) has identified twenty-four unique expressions of perspective transformation and has organized them in to a typology comprised of six categories. These six categories recognize changes in one's worldview, ontology, epistemology, self, and behavior. Given economics' subject matter, seven of the twenty-four expressions present opportunities for the higher education economics instructor to promote perspective transformation in adult learners (see Table 1).

Teaching Strategies

Promoting perspective transformation in an economics classroom involves three strategies:

1. The Challenge – creating a potential dilemma
2. Critical Reflection – the student's attempt to resolve the dilemma, and
3. Reflective Discourse – the resolution the dilemma through group discussion.

Typology of potential transformative learning outcomes

Table 1 shows the five categories and seven transformations which are well suited for economic content in a higher education classroom.

Table 1
Typology of potential transformative learning outcomes from an undergraduate economics class

Category	Transformation	Description
Worldview	More comprehensive or complex worldview	More inclusive meaning structures due to recognition of more diverse social systems or approaches.
Worldview	New awareness/new understandings	Entirely new meaning structures due to recognition of more diverse social, economic or political/power structures.
Self	Personal narratives	Changes to meaning structure which affect the learner's sense of self.
Epistemology	More discriminating	A more realistic approach to knowledge or cultural norms that is more critical and less passively accepting.
Epistemology	More open	Greater awareness and less rigid habits of mind and points of view allowing greater potential for future transformations.
Ontology	Attributes	Development of new or increase of existing personal attributes (e.g. empathy, generosity, vulnerability, etc.)
Behavior	Skills	Development of new skills which allow the learner to influence for or implement greater agency in oneself or others.

Challenge, Reflection, and Discourse

The Challenge is the presentation of a query or fact which may not be compatible with the student's point of view - a potential dilemma the self-reflective student is inspired to resolved. Process and content assumptions in economics often provide the most direct pathway to challenging students' points of view. For example, process assumptions could be examined by asking "*Why are secondary activities not collected in the American Time Use Survey?*".

Critical Reflection takes place when students recognize and then attempt to resolve the dilemma presented. The power of process reflection is the manner in which it challenges "the problem-solving strategies that are being used. It is asking questions

of the form, *How did this come to be?*" (Cranton, 2006, p. 34).

When thoughtfully applied, such reflection can create a more realistic approach to knowledge which is more critical and less passively accepting. Some interest in self-knowledge is essential for effective critical reflection – however where it lacks effort or intensity, peer engagement through reflective discourse can help.

Reflective Discourse occurs when students share ideas in search of a common understanding or justification for a belief/point of view. Its goal is the testing and revision of assumptions through exposure to alternate points of view. According to Mezirow "because so many of our beliefs or knowledge claims involve assumptions about the coherence, truth, authenticity, or normative appropriateness of the claim . . . we must rely primarily upon consensual validation to resolve these issues" (1995, p. 67).

Unpredictable Outcomes

Because this is not a normative exercise and the student's own experience will influence whether and to what extent a point of view may be found to be outdated, *success is defined as the transformation of perspective*, and not a specific worldview, epistemology, etc.

Reference

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- Hoggan, C. D. (2016). Transformative learning as a metatheory: Definition, criteria, and typology. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 66(1), 57-75.
- Mezirow, J. (1995). Transformation theory of adult learning. In Welton, M. R. (Ed.). *In defense of the lifeworld: Critical perspectives on adult learning* (pp. 39-70). SUNY Press.
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