

Disorienting VET: enhancing VET practice through transformative learning theory

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Abstract

This paper will explore the contention that Australian VET may be an environment in which transformative learning can occur, and indicate ways to enhance VET practice in relation to this kind of learning. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is surveyed to provide background. Two examples of VET programs are described to show how VET can serve as a context for transformative learning. It is suggested that if there are VET programs that produce conditions favourable to transformative learning, then practitioners working in these areas can enhance their practice through familiarity with the features of transformative learning and ways that have been promoted for the support and facilitation of transformative learning.

Introduction

This paper will explore the contention that Australian VET may be an environment in which transformative learning can occur, and indicate ways to enhance VET practice in relation to this kind of learning. Transformative learning refers to a variety of adult learning in which learners experience changes in the way they see the world and themselves. Transformative learning can be contrasted with the kind of learning that involves the acquisition of discrete skills and knowledge, such as the learning involved in competency-based training (CBT). Transformative learning does not have a high profile within the official discourse of VET in Australia. Indeed, so strong is the focus on industry needs and economic imperatives in Australian VET that learning theory as a whole appears to have become a secondary issue, leading to a situation where serious concerns have been expressed about the quality of contemporary VET pedagogy (e.g. Chappell 2004, Junor 2005). Darwin (2007) has even argued that a narrow behavioural 'transmission' model of learning – an approach almost diametrically opposed to transformative learning – has become the default learning theory informing the practice of a new generation of VET practitioners. Nevertheless, as I will illustrate in this paper, transformative contexts form part of the Australian VET system, and because transformative learning presents a unique set of challenges for VET pedagogy, it is important to alert practitioners to ways to identify and support transformative learning.

In the following discussion I will first provide an overview of Mezirow's (1978, 1991, 2000) theory of transformative learning. I will then provide two illustrations drawn from my own experiences in VET to support the contention that Australian VET hosts transformative contexts. Finally, I will present a survey of Cranton's (2006) suggestions for understanding and practically promoting transformative learning.

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning is a flourishing field of research and theory building in adult education. It has even been suggested that transformative learning has displaced andragogy as

the paradigm of the adult learning experience (Taylor 2006: 189). The central figure in the development of transformative learning is Jack Mezirow, who started assembling his theory in the 1970s. Literature on the origins of transformative learning theory also points to the significance of Paulo Freire's writings, but it is undoubtedly the efforts of Mezirow that have elevated transformation theory to its current position in American adult education. Mezirow refined his theory throughout the 1980s and 90s through a number of articles and chapters, as well as a book entitled *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (1991).

The empirical basis of Mezirow's theory is qualitative research he conducted on women returning to education published in 1978. Intrigued by the educational experiences of his wife, Mezirow became interested in the way the process could lead to far-reaching changes in outlook. Mezirow styled these deep shifts 'perspective transformations'. As Mezirow (1978: 12) explains,

For a perspective change to occur, a painful reappraisal of our current perspective must be thrust upon us. Among re-entry women whom we interviewed, the disturbing event was often external in origin – the death of a husband, a divorce, the loss of a job, a change of city of residence, retirement, an empty nest, a remarriage, the near fatal accident of an only child, or jealousy of a friend who had launched a new career successfully. These disorienting dilemmas of adulthood can dissociate one from long-established modes of living and bring into sharp focus questions of identity, of the meaning and direction of one's life.

The theory of transformative learning is intended as a decisive contribution to the problem of how to distinguish adult learning. Mezirow (1978) portrays the learning of young people as essentially an uncritical process of assimilation. In contrast, although the process of uncritical assimilation continues into adulthood, the possibility of the critique of assumptions opens up for the adult. For Mezirow, this possibility constitutes the essence of adult learning. Another way that Mezirow expresses the difference between adult and pre-adult learning is to say that '[i]n childhood, maturity is a formative process – one of socialization, of learning adult roles. In adulthood the process is transformative – involving alienation from those roles, reframing new perspectives, and reengaging life with a greater degree of self-determination.' (1978: 12)

At a psychological level, Mezirow believes that knowledge is comprised of two hierarchically related elements: meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. A meaning scheme is made up of 'specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings...' (Mezirow 1991: 5). A meaning scheme can also encompass what is generally referred to as 'skills' (Mezirow 1991: 93). Meaning perspectives, on the other hand, are higher-level structures, and subsume meaning schemes within them. A meaning perspective has cognitive, affective and conative dimensions, and is defined as 'the structure of assumptions within which one's past *experience assimilates and transforms new experience*' (Mezirow 1991: 42, emphasis in the original). Mezirow (1991) distinguishes three kinds of meaning perspective: 'epistemic perspectives' that include a person's tendency to think in concrete of abstract terms and their cognitive styles and learning preferences; 'sociolinguistic perspectives' that include social norms and roles; and 'psychological perspectives' that include such elements as a person's self-concept, inhibitions and neuroses (1991: 43). In later writings, Mezirow differentiates a greater number of perspective types (e.g. 2000: 17), but the role of meaning

perspectives (which Mezirow tends to call 'frames of reference' in his later writings) as broad, often unconscious structures, remains constant.

Four distinct forms of learning emerge from Mezirow's meaning schemes/meaning perspectives structure. At the most basic level there is 'learning through meaning schemes' in which existing meaning schemes are differentiated and elaborated further (1991: 93). Mezirow gives as examples of this kind of learning 'that we must keep our head down as we swing a golf club to improve our drive' and 'that honesty can refer to self-disclosure as well as to abiding by the law' (1991: 93).

The second form of learning in Mezirow's theory is learning new meaning schemes. Mezirow cites learning how to take tests or learning a new role as examples of this kind of learning (1991: 93). An important point to observe here is that learning a new meaning scheme presupposes the compatibility of the new material with the relevant existing superordinate meaning perspective. Learning new meaning schemes serves to strengthen existing meaning perspectives by allowing them to encompass material that would otherwise have been found inconsistent or anomalous in terms of the older perspective (1991: 93-94).

Learning through transformation of meaning schemes is the third form of learning in Mezirow's theory. When we confront new content at the level of meaning schemes that is not compatible with existing meaning perspectives and schemes, we may be forced to revise existing meaning schemes to accommodate the new content. Mezirow provides the following example of this kind of learning:

[A] woman attending an early evening class at a local college who feels obliged to rush home to prepare dinner for her husband may come to question the meaning scheme that produces that compulsion as she encounters other women who do not feel a need to fulfill this stereotypical sex role. (1991: 94)

Mezirow explains that as a result of this kind of experience 'we experience a growing sense of the inadequacy of our old ways of seeing and understanding meaning'. (1991: 94) It seems that Mezirow believes that it is quite possible to endure this kind of tension indefinitely. However, he says that an 'accretion' of transformed meaning schemes can lead to the fourth kind of learning, perspective transformation.

Learning through perspective transformation involves 'becoming aware, through reflection and critique, of specific presuppositions upon which a distorted or incomplete meaning perspective is based and then transforming that perspective through a reorganisation of meaning.... It begins when we encounter experiences, often in an emotionally charged situation, that fail to fit our expectations and consequently lack meaning for us, or we encounter an anomaly that cannot be given coherence either by learning within existing schemes or by learning new schemes.' (Mezirow 1991: 94) It is not possible to specify the outcome of this kind of learning in terms of content, but Mezirow (1991: 156) does offer a 'test' by which a 'developmentally progressive perspective' can be identified:

The test of a developmentally progressive perspective is 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.

In theorising the process through which the psychological structures of meaning perspectives transform, Mezirow posits 10 'phases':

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (1991: 168-169)

Mezirow does not insist that learning through perspective transformation necessarily involves all of these phases or in the order presented, but he does regard some parts of the process as essential. The initial phase, a 'disorientating dilemma', is always significant because it represents the raising of consciousness to a new level in relation to all prior learning, and signals the onset of this uniquely adult process. Mezirow also emphasises the discomfort evident in the second phase. As he says, '[f]or a perspective transformation to occur, a painful reappraisal of our current perspective must be thrust upon us.' (1978: 12) However, Mezirow places the most importance in the process on the third phase in this sequence, that of critical assessment or reflection on assumptions.

Mezirow (1991) distinguishes three modes of reflection that may play a role in transformative learning. At the most basic level is 'content reflection' which involves reflection on *what* we perceive, think, feel or act upon. (1991: 107) This kind of reflection is more than simply introspection (awareness of mental activity) in that it involves judgment about the content. An example of content reflection, according to Mezirow, would be concluding that 'John is bad' on the basis of some kind of evidence. The second mode of reflection is 'process reflection' in which we reflect on *how* we perceive, think, feel and act. (1991: 108) Here, for example, we might question whether we may have misinterpreted evidence when we arrived at the judgment that John is bad. The third and most complex mode of reflection is 'premise reflection' where we question *why* we perceive, think, feel or act the way we do. To continue with the example, premise reflection would be taking place if we questioned whether the notions of good or bad are indeed relevant in John's case. (1991: 108) Mezirow believes that both content and process reflection are instrumental in the first three kinds of learning posited within his learning theory. (1991: 111) In other words, the extension, acquisition and transformation of meaning schemes take place through reflection upon what and how we judge. Premise reflection, which involves critically assessing our assumptions, or reflecting on the why of perceptions, thoughts, feelings and actions is the kind of thinking that leads to the fourth kind of learning, perspective transformation. As Mezirow explains, '[p]remise reflection is the dynamic by which our belief systems – meaning perspectives – become transformed. Premise reflection leads to more fully developed meaning perspectives, that is, meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable (open), and integrative of experience.' (1991: 111)

We will conclude this overview of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning with a brief consideration of the role of learning through the acquisition of skills and knowledge in perspective transformation. In terms of Mezirow's four forms of learning, the development of competencies obviously encompasses the first two, i.e., learning through extending meaning schemes and learning through new meaning schemes. To the extent that skill development exposes learners to skills and knowledge that conflict with prior learning, it is possible that competency-based learning can lead to the third form of learning – learning through the transformation of meaning schemes – and thence, through the accumulation of such transformations, potentially to perspective transformation. However, the practice of CBT rarely places learners into experiences characterised by repeated conflicts between existing and new skills. It follows that in terms of Mezirow's theory, learning in CBT cannot systematically lead to perspective transformation, although it has limited potential to lead indirectly to transformative learning.

However, one of Mezirow's most influential followers, Cranton (2006), explicitly stresses the potential of technical learning or 'training' for triggering perspective transformation. She observes that '[t]he current adult education literature places little emphasis on the acquisition of technical knowledge, but this is what many people do – help others learn technical knowledge and skills.' (2006: 102) She goes on to explain that

I am...very conscious of how instrumental learning (the acquisition of technical knowledge) spirals into transformative learning and how, in turn, transformative learning can lead people to the further need for instrumental learning. Learning how to be a carpenter has as much potential to lead people into a deep shift in the way they see themselves and the world around them as does studying critical theory or exploring childhood traumas through narrative. (2006: 102-103)

Cranton's observation here reflects her experiences in facilitating programs designed for trades people to acquire the basic qualification required in Canada to teach in their VET system, functionally equivalent to the Australian *Certificate IV in Training and Assessment*. The learning experiences she is reflecting on, then, pertain to the effort to learn new skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to perform a new work role. However, this means that Cranton (2006) is pointing to transformative learning being triggered by Mezirow's second form of learning – learning through acquiring new meaning schemes – which he does not explicitly link to perspective transformation. Cranton's (2006) identification of this particular starting point of perspective transformation therefore indicates a need to question and perhaps revise Mezirow's (1991) ideas about the relationships between his four forms of learning.

Transformative learning in Australian VET

In spite of the theoretical tension between transformative learning and CBT, it is the contention of this paper that Australian VET nevertheless provides contexts for transformative learning. At this stage there is very little research exploring the relationship between transformative learning and VET, and none that applies Mezirow's theory to Australian VET, although some Australian research offers tantalising glimpses of the transformative potential of vocational learning. For example, James (2002) examines the influence of VET on the formation of worker and practitioner identities, a process that shifts the VET learning experience beyond the sphere of CBT. In this section I will draw on my own experience within the training sector over the past five years to illustrate the contention

that Australian VET contains transformative contexts. These observations were made from the perspective of a number of roles, including training design and facilitation, student counselling and training management, all involving close interaction with adult learners. A common feature of these illustrations is that they take place in the context of nationally accredited training based on programs that conform to the principles of CBT.

The first examples of transformative learning in VET to come to my attention were in the institutional setting of a private community service-oriented training provider. I participated in the design and facilitation of a Certificate I level course for unemployed Indigenous adults and young adults. The program involved practical 'self management' skills relating to finances and personal presentation for the workplace, through to team communication techniques and workplace literacy. The program also included a work placement component, with learning transfer mechanisms to encourage the application of classroom learning to the workplace. As mentioned, the program was informed by CBT principles, reinforced by the level of target workplace organisation interest in the structuring of the program and selection of learning activities. Any auditor or prospective employer would have been able to consult the program documentation to see clearly defined the skill and knowledge outcomes the program was designed to realise.

The interesting thing about this program was the way the major learning dynamics of individuals and often the whole group (of between eight and 12) surpassed the bounds of the program objectives quite quickly. At first, the group appeared to acquiesce in the purposes of the course. However, within days of commencement the learning activities were being overwhelmed by apparently peripheral issues. The personal finance unit raised problems that related to different cultural interpretations of financial responsibility. The personal presentation subject called up issues relating to compliance and resistance. The workplace communication activities brought to light experiences and concerns to do with respect and shame, while literacy activities dredged up volatile memories of school and power relations. The learners in this course became very engaged, but at the same time the learning diverged more and more from the competencies that were supposed to be acquired. By the end of the program a majority of the learners were quite stirred, while a minority could be characterised as 'changed'. Only a small number went directly from the program into employment, by which measure the program was a failure.

The second example also occurs in a private community service-oriented training provider. As a training manager I oversaw a Certificate IV course designed to prepare learners for a front-line role in a demanding area within the community services sector. Learners were expected to develop a wide range of competencies that ranged from elaborating their own communication skills through to amassing a knowledge of typical problems among the client group and programs designed to address these problems. A cursory glance at the training documentation indicated that it was an orthodox CBT program fulfilling the purpose of supplying an 'industry' with workers possessed of standardised abilities.

However, while the outward trappings of the program complied with CBT principles, the experience of learners was another matter. After a bedding down period during which learners would get to know each other and adjust to the quasi-academic demands of the classroom-based component of the program, strange things would start to happen. Most learners would become heavily engaged in the value-laden program content. Disagreements would start to emerge among the learners regarding the purposes of their learning, the nature of the field, the ills of humankind. Learners would find themselves at odds with themselves,

their friends and family outside the course. Staff involved in the facilitation of the program would regularly move into intense, time-consuming supportive relationships with the troubled learners. Work-experience placement periods would energise many but heighten the discontent of others. Crises would punctuate the progress of the training. It is not exaggerating to say that most of the learners were changed as people (either through direct experience or as witnesses) at the completion of the course. And most of these events of the lived course had no representation within the Units of Competency texts. However, and in contrast to the first example, graduates from this particular program were actively sought out by employers in the sector, so highly regarded was this course as a vehicle for the preparation of 'competent' workers.

What I think these two examples show is a structural potential for transformative learning within circumscribed settings in Australian VET. Clearly, not all learners in these examples experienced perspective transformation. However, it can be argued that these contexts raise the potential for perspective transformation. In terms of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, a number of features of the learning in these examples suggest transformative processes. For instance, in both examples learners encountered meaning schemes both explicit and implicit that conflicted with existing meaning schemes, opening the way to learning through the transformation of meaning schemes. Many of these learners were exposed to such conflicts repeatedly, which in Mezirow's theory can lead to perspective transformation through the accumulation of meaning scheme transformations. Again, while both content and process types of reflection were prominent in the learning experiences in these examples, it is clear that these experiences and environments evoked premise reflection in some of the learners. In the first example, many learners were led to reflect on their own assumptions about the world of work when exposed to representations of workplace requirements in the training program. In the second example many learners brought with them a host of deeply held and honoured assumptions about the causes of problems in their client groups, and these assumptions would be regularly challenged by the solutions presented in the curriculum, and the nature of the problems as they presented themselves in the reality of work experience. Finally, the examples indicate the emergence of disorienting dilemmas for some of the learners from within the learning program. While Mezirow's (1978) research produced evidence of the extracurricular origin of disorienting dilemmas, these examples above force upon us the counter-intuitive concept of specific VET settings that systematically generate disorienting conditions.

Enhancing VET practice through transformative learning theory

Regardless of whether and how transformative learning theory and the philosophy of competency-based training can find common conceptual ground, if it is accepted that Mezirow's work actually describes a learning process, and if some of the associated phenomena can be observed in Australian VET, then the practical aspects of transformative learning theory should be of interest to those involved in instigating, facilitating, assessing and managing VET. In this final section I will address the question of identifying, supporting and facilitating transformative learning.

With respect to identifying transformative learning, the adult educator can find clues in both the curriculum and the manner in which the learner responds. On the curricular side, where learning activities call for 'premise reflection', or the assessment of assumptions, a key condition for transformative learning is thereby created. Practitioners working with Training

Packages such as the Community Services package, or with certain higher level Competency Standards (for example Diploma or Advanced Diploma level units) may find themselves employing facilitation techniques that involve challenging learners to reflect on reasons for their own or others' behaviour. In such cases transformative learning may well follow. Regarding learner responses to curriculum, Mezirow's description of the phases of perspective transformation provide indications for possible transformative learning experiences. It will be recalled that Mezirow's paradigmatic initial symptom is the 'disorienting dilemma', which gives way to a phase that can involve a range of emotions from discomfort through to more severe forms of disturbance. Where the educator can be satisfied that experiences like these are being produced by the learning process then here again transformative learning may be taking place. Yet a learner need not exhibit signs of disorientation to be engaged in perspective transformation, as they may just as well go through any of the other phases and in no particular order. However, signs of engaging in a dilemma and suffering in some measure as a result are widely acknowledged as attending transformative learning. It might also be mentioned here that learning experiences which involve the learner encountering knowledge and skills that conflict with existing knowledge and skills may lead to learning through the transformation of meaning schemes. Although this form of learning may only generate tension within the learner, Mezirow says that an accumulation of these transformations may bring about perspective transformation. In this case, it will be difficult to foretell the likelihood of transformative conditions by studying the curriculum, because it is very much the unique complex of prior learning of the learner that determines the emergence of discrepancies between old and new learning. Suffice to say here that where the educator observes a series of specific knowledge and skill acquisitions that conflict with prior learning as a whole, and where the learner is repeatedly discomfited by the episodes then perspective transformation is a possibility.

Beyond identifying the learning conditions that may promote, or the symptoms that may indicate, transformative learning, a significant question for adult educators is how this kind of learning is to be supported. Given some of the potentially negative psychological and social consequences of transformative learning mentioned above, the question of support becomes a poignant one. Cranton (2006) has enumerated a range of approaches and considerations that adult educators may find useful in any attempt to support transformative learning. She first stresses a concept she calls 'authenticity', which refers to a personal stance or overall attitude adopted by the educator with respect to learners. Authenticity is defined as 'the expression of the genuine self in a community or with others in relationship.' (2001, in Cranton 2006: 162). Her examples describe an educator who combines empathy and conscientiousness with a measure of self-disclosure, a sample of which include:

- Demonstrate interest in and concern for student learning and development
- Illustrate and provide examples by drawing on our experience and encourage students to do the same
- Follow up with students, asking whether they need help or are feeling comfortable (Cranton 2006: 162-3)

She also acknowledges that not all educators will be comfortable with all of her suggestions, but she does assert that 'Being authentic in our relationship with students is central to being supportive' (2006: 162)

A second way Cranton (2006: 163) believes transformative learning can be supported is through the learning group or class. 'At the very least', she says, 'the group can provide a protective and comforting blanket for those individual members who are experiencing the sad or difficult sides of transformation.' However, most educators are aware that not all groups evolve into an entity that is likely to provide a 'protective and comforting blanket' for disoriented learners. Cranton (2006: 164) acknowledges this reality, and points to a number of techniques that have been proposed by various writers to foster the development of supportive groups, such as those of Brookfield and Preskill (1999) and O'Hara (2003). Some of Cranton's (2006: 165-6) suggestions (following O'Hara) include:

- Make the process of group development open and explicit – what is done and how it is done
- Work toward accepting ambiguity and including those with whom we disagree
- Meet as a group outside of the usual learning environment

Learner networks are another way Cranton (2006) identifies to support transformative learning. She defines this kind of network as 'any sustained relationship among a group of people within a formal or informal learning context or a relationship that extends beyond the boundaries of the learning group'. Some ideas suggested by Cranton (2006: 167-8) to encourage the formation of supportive learning networks are:

- Using small-group activities or discussions during which learners can get to know each other and develop alliances
- Forming project groups or teams in which people work together over a longer period in an area of common interest
- Fostering liaisons by referring learners to each other when they ask questions, share concerns, or encounter problems

Cranton (2006) also discusses helping learners with personal adjustment as a support practice. As she explains (2006: 169), 'Educators regularly counsel students on job opportunities, courses or programs, thesis topics, project activities, and readings.' However, here again some educators may feel uncomfortable about becoming too closely involved in the personal life of learners. There is the related danger of the educator becoming embroiled in a situation where transformative learning spills over into psychological disorder, when professional counselling is required. Cranton acknowledges these difficulties, but offers advice for educators who choose to venture into more personalised modes of support such as:

- Demonstrate empathy and positive unconditional regard for learners
- As the relationship develops, help the student move away from dependency and into a collaborative role
- Avoid giving opinions or advice; encourage individuals to find their own solutions through dialogue

One of the phases of transformative learning described by Mezirow is 'planning a course of action' (1991: 168). In Mezirow's view, transformative learning is not just a psychological episode, but has a concrete counterpart. Cranton (2006) identifies the support of such action

as a further concern of the adult educator. To provide this kind of support, she suggests helping learners to develop 'action plans', which can involve steps of setting goals (short and long term), considering boundaries and resources, imagining alternatives and consequences, implementing the plan, and seeking feedback (Cranton 2006: 172-3).

The ethical issues surrounding the enterprise of promoting transformative learning have been highlighted at a couple of points in this discussion. Cranton (2006: 175) indicates that awareness of these issues can lead the educator to profound questioning of their own values and recognition of the morally vexed issue of the exercise of power in the learning situation. In the light of these difficulties, the adult educator may find that one way to support transformative learning is to make the moral dimensions of learning explicit as opportunities arise during learning. In terms of practice, Cranton (2006: 176) declares that 'Supporting learners who are working toward transformative learning involves managing conflict and living with ethical issues in a responsible, professional and open manner.'

Cranton's (2006: 176) final suggestion for supporting transformative learning 'requires a good understanding of individual differences in style, psychological preferences, values, culture, race and gender'. For instance, an awareness of Jung's theory of psychological types (in which individuals tend to be either introverted or extroverted, and favour one or more of the functions of thinking, feeling, sensing or intuiting over another) may guide the educator in identifying the most sensitive and effective way to respond to learner difficulties. Again, knowledge of different cultural norms and practices is another way to tailor support activities. In these examples, an appreciation of difference is taken to be a powerful way to minimise complications that may attend the fundamental process of perspective transformation.

Many VET practitioners will recognise and already be using many if not all of these support techniques in their regular work. Indeed, Cranton (2006) draws several of these ideas from practical, mainstream adult education sources. The value of her catalogue, however, lies in the fact that of all the practical measures she has applied in her work as an educator concerned with transformation, these are the most efficacious in the context of perspective transformation. But if techniques such as these are in general use in Australian VET it begs the question whether educators are using them, at least occasionally, precisely because they are effective in cases where learners are exhibiting signs of 'undiagnosed' perspective transformation.

While these suggestions and observations concerning the identification and support of transformative learning may be of particular value to designers and the facilitators and other support staff within Australian VET whose work brings them into personal contact with learners, the issue of valuing transformative learning has significance for both practice and policy. In terms of practice, valuing transformative learning is an appropriate context for the identification, facilitation and support of perspective transformation. With respect to policy and theory, if transformative learning is a legitimate (if not fundamental) form of adult learning, and if it can be demonstrated that aspects of the Australian VET curriculum may produce conditions that foster perspective transformation, then the question arises as to whether perspective transformation should be hailed as a valuable kind of learning in connection with at least some goals of VET. For instance, it may be that in certain industry areas (e.g. Community Services) or professional programs (e.g. the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment) perspective transformation could prove to be a desirable process in the preparation of competent workers. Again, it may be that perspective transformation is an appropriate process in the learning of workers who are moving into higher levels of

responsibility requiring competencies found in the higher VET qualifications. Finally, there remains the generalised possibility that perspective transformation may be an appropriate part of the learning of students who are encountering competencies that conflict with existing skills, knowledge and attitudes, or who are taking on new work roles as part of a 'multiskilling' initiative in the workplace, though voluntary career change or through retrenchment.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore transformative learning in the context of Australian VET, and examine ways to identify, support and facilitate transformative learning. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning was introduced as a framework for understanding what is argued to be a unique adult learning phenomenon. The concepts of meaning perspective and meaning scheme were sketched, and their role in the four kinds of learning proposed by Mezirow identified. The phases of perspective transformation were presented, including the initial phase of 'disorienting dilemma' that marks the onset of transformative learning, and the apparently necessary phase of critical reflection that involves assessing assumptions through 'premise reflection'. It was noted that from the viewpoint of Mezirow's theory, competency-based training should have limited transformative potential. However, Cranton (2006) was quoted in support of the idea that vocational training can play a part in triggering transformative learning, and I supplied examples from my own VET experience to indicate transformative potential in some competency-based programs. I suggested that these programs could in fact engender types of learning Mezirow recognised as transformative, that they could involve critical reflection on assumptions, and that they produced conditions that can precipitate disorienting dilemmas.

If parts of Australian VET can indeed serve as a catalyst of transformative learning, then practitioners working in those areas may be able to enhance their effectiveness by learning how to identify transformative learning, and ways to support and promote it. Cranton's (2006) pointers for facilitating transformative learning, including teacher authenticity, fostering group support and learner networks, counselling students and facilitating action plans, were suggested as ways to nurture transformative learning in the formal program setting.

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