Transformation theory: A theory of adult learning

I am often skeptical of some of the language we use in education, and that is common in other sectors too. This includes words such as: disruption, innovation, transformation. I wonder about the human impact using these words has. How does it feel to be 'disrupted', to be asked to 'innovate', or to 'transform' one's self or one's practice? This isn't to say though that I don't believe in challenge or provocation, nor that I don't see the value in encouraging people to test their assumptions and question their underlying beliefs. Indeed, far from it.

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So let's think more about transformation for a moment.

Common metaphors for transformation include the butterfly, which evolves from its humble beginnings as a caterpillar into a beautiful, soaring creature. Another metaphor is a Biblical one: St Paul's conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus. Both of these metaphors encompass the idea of a sudden, dramatic, and profound change in direction or orientation or worldview. When we talk about transformative experiences, we might say something like: 'the scales fall from your eyes', or use what is a favourite quotation of mine (attributed both to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes): "The mind once stretched by a new idea, never returns to its original dimensions".

But there is another aspect to transformation I think it's useful to know of: the adult learning theory – Transformation Theory. Transformation Theory is generally ascribed to American Jack Mezirow based on his study of women returning to university in the late 1970s. Mezirow (2009) offers this definition of transformative learning: "Transformative learning may be defined as learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (p. 22, emphasis in original).

Transformation Theory focuses on critical reflection and dialogue to support people to adapt their worldview – to orient it towards being agentic, inclusive, open, seeking social justice and equity. Therefore we could say that transformative learning occurs when a person is

able to change their their worldview, for example about what knowledge is; how society operates; or about their beliefs about themselves (Kitchenham, 2008).

In practice, Transformation Theory could look like CORE Education's [Dr Vince Ham eFellowship](). The Dr Vince Ham eFellows are committed to exploring ways of doing education differently for their schools, kura, centres and communities. The purpose of the Dr Vince Ham eFellowship is to inspire transformational practice through inquiry. eFellows are mentored through their own deep inquiry journey that generally takes the form of an action research project. They experience workshops, field trips, critical reflection and dialogue – learning from and with one another.

Further, Transformation Theory can also support school and kura leaders to think about how they design professional learning and development opportunities for their colleagues. Some of the challenges include: nurturing robust professional learning conversations; creating safe environments where people feel comfortable in being vulnerable: admitting they don't know, or made a mistake. It is important that leaders value and model critical reflection and dialogue with one another, and with colleagues.

To that end, leaders might consider the following questions:

- How might we encourage teachers to understand their current worldview and assumptions about education, including their position within the education system?

- How might we foster supportive, safe, and inclusive relationships that allow space for critical reflection and dialogue to unfold?

- How might we respectfully challenge our assumptions and our assumptions of others so that we can learn other ways in which to view the world?

References and further reading:

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