

## **Transformative learning challenges in a context of trauma and fear: an educator's story**

Vaughn M. John

University of KwaZulu-Natal

---

*After more than three decades of development, transformative learning theory is currently a major theory of adult learning. It has also attracted substantial critique, leading to further development, application and differentiation. Recent contributions to this vast scholarship show a quest for a more unified theory.*

*This article examines transformative learning theory via a case study of an adult education project in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Drawing on life and pedagogical experiences of an educator, it focusses on aspects of the theory subjected to critique and raises questions about attempts to foster transformative learning in oppressive contexts involving trauma and fear. The article calls for greater attention to the life and experiences of the educator in the learning process while responding to calls for theoretical examination in more diverse contexts. It thus illustrates how more varied, situated accounts of transformative learning attempts may challenge and improve our understandings of adult learning encounters.*

**Keywords:** *Transformative learning theory, educator life experiences, adult education, KwaZulu-Natal.*

---

## **Introduction**

Transformative learning theory, first articulated by the American adult education theorist Jack Mezirow in 1978, has received substantial attention from both practitioners and researchers in adult education. A series of influential studies by Taylor (1997, 2001, 2007, 2008) typifies and elaborates the interest in transformative learning theory from a research perspective. The recent article by Christie, Carey, Robertson and Grainger (2015), in this journal, reviewed some of this literature and highlighted key aspects of critique of the theory. Their interest of forging tighter links between the theory and practice, as displayed in the work of Cranton (1994; 1996) and Apte (2009), is also at the heart of this article.

Today, transformative learning theory rests on over three decades of development and scholarship in adult education, and stands as a major theory of adult learning with considerable support in the empirical literature (Christie et. al, 2015; Taylor & Snyder, 2012; Apte, 2009; Taylor, 1997, 2007). The theory has also attracted much critique (Newman, 2014, Taylor, 2007; Inglis, 1997; Newman, 1994) some of which has evoked responses from Mezirow himself (Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow, 1998). Recent development of this vast scholarship shows a quest for a more unified theory (Cranton and Taylor, 2012). While substantial, most of this literature has emerged from Western contexts, prompting calls for explorations of the theory in more diverse contexts (Taylor, 1997; Ntseane, 2011; Ntseane, 2012). This article responds to such calls by exploring the challenges of attempting transformative learning in an oppressive South African context marked by fear and trauma.

This article examines transformative learning theory in the light of findings from a case study of the Human Rights, Democracy and Development (HRDD) project, an adult education project in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This province has a deep and painful history of political violence and civil war. The trauma and fear from such experiences continue to strongly frame learners' and educators'

classroom interactions. Drawing on life and pedagogical experiences of an educator (called Cosmos) in the HRDD project, the article focusses on aspects of the theory which have been the subject of critique and raises questions about attempts to foster transformative learning in a context of trauma and fear. In particular, it draws attention to the manner in which such contexts shape the frames of reference of educators and questions what levels of transformation are possible when educators themselves are constrained by fear and trauma. While based primarily on the story of Cosmos, data from other educators and a learner are briefly included to convey the levels of fear, trauma and oppression generally experienced by educators and learners in this context. The article first reviews relevant literature on transformative learning theory and provides introductions to the HRDD project and its context.

### **Transformative learning theory**

Transformative learning theory deals with a learning process in which adults examine their meaning perspectives, via a process of critical reflection (premise reflection), resulting in transformation of such perspectives. When perspectives are transformed, emancipatory learning is said to have occurred, paving the way for personal transformation. Mezirow (1998:72) explains that transformative learning theory “deals with how individuals may be empowered to learn to free themselves from unexamined ways of thinking that impede effective judgement and action”. Understanding how a context of fear and trauma may impede pedagogical action and limit freedom to examine ways of thinking, are important considerations in the ongoing development of this theory.

Transformative learning theory according to Mezirow is where “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Taylor, 2007:173). Mezirow (1975; 1991) argued that adults develop over the course of their lives frames of reference or meaning perspectives. These structures shape their thinking, beliefs and actions. Meaning perspectives act as powerful filters or mediators when interpreting new experiences. Despite a large body of literature on transformative learning, little is known about how

the frames of reference of learners, and importantly those of educators as well, are shaped by conditions of fear and trauma. A key purpose of this article is to contribute to this gap in the literature by exploring the challenges faced by an educator when attempting transformative learning in a post-conflict context which remained oppressive. The article draws attention to the manner in which a post-conflict context shapes the frames of reference of educators and questions what levels of transformation are possible when educators themselves are constrained by fear and trauma.

Mezirow argued that when confronted with new experiences, adults need to integrate such experiences with their prior learning. Often, such integration will occur smoothly. However, when integration is not smooth, but presents a disorienting dilemma or contradiction for the person, the person has to find a way of resolving the tension. When the person reflects on and revises their meaning perspective, transformative learning is said to have occurred (Mezirow 1975; Mezirow, 1991).

On the basis of his early research, Mezirow (1991:168) described a ten-phase process of perspective transformation which began with the experience of a disorienting dilemma. While studies have confirmed the general model of perspective transformation, several have found the process to be recursive rather than linear and that the change could be either dramatic or gradual. Mezirow subsequently acknowledged that the process may not follow the exact 10-phase sequence (Taylor, 1997). A brief review of some of the studies which have applied transformative learning theory is now offered in relation to the study reported here. More comprehensive reviews are provided by Taylor (1997, 2007) and Taylor and Snyder (2012).

### **Applications of transformative learning theory in research**

Transformative learning theory has been employed in a number of empirical studies and theoretical essays in adult education and other areas of education. Taylor's reviews (1997, 2007) and update of emerging conceptions (Taylor, 2008) attest to such widespread engagement with transformative learning theory in studies of social and community transformation, participation in group experiences, personal illness, intercultural learning and lifestyle and career changes, amongst others.

In a study which was largely supportive of the theory, Bennetts (2003) found that individuals within a fellowship scheme involving supportive and trusting relationships, enjoyed significant transformations in motivation, career aspirations, relationships and quality of life. This pro-transformational role of supportive and trusting relationships has also been identified as a key feature in the Afrocentric perspective advanced by Ntseane (2011, 2012). Ntseane (2012) attributes these features to the concept of ubuntu which has shaped an African worldview centred on belonging and connectedness. The present study, through the story of Cosmos, reveals the constraints on transformative learning in a post-conflict context lacking support and trust.

A study which specifically explores transformative learning during a post-conflict phase of a group of adults' lives is offered by Magro and Polyzoi (2009). Interviews with refugees in Greece and Canada, many of whom had experienced severe trauma and loss similar to that of participants reported on in this article, showed that for refugees "who came from zones of conflict and war, the ability to think critically and be open to new learning is [negatively] influenced by trauma and stress" (Magro & Polyzoi, 2009:104) While Magro and Polyzoi's study explores the effects of these experiences on the learner, the present study discusses similar effects on the educator.

While studies generally indicate support for the theory, some have also been a rich source of critique and an impetus to further development of transformative learning theory. The final section of this article engages with some of this critique within the gaze of an educator's (named Cosmos) story. For the purposes of this article it is more appropriate to engage with this aspect of the literature in discussion of the dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and Cosmos' practices. In particular, critique of the theory relating to the role of intense emotions and prior stressful life events (Taylor, 1997) and contexts of systemic oppression (Newman, 1994) are discussed.

While transformative learning theory has a substantial and growing literature, the development, application and critique of the learning theory, however, has a strong Western frame developed primarily from studies of formal learning contexts. There is a need for examination of the theory in more diverse contexts including more non-formal

education contexts as called for by Taylor, Duveskog & Friis-Hansen (2012). The present study of the HRDD project affords such opportunity to explore transformative learning in a non-formal educational context in Africa.

### **The Human Rights, Democracy and Development (HRDD) project**

The HRDD project was an adult education and development intervention in rural KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. Initiated in 1999 as a partnership between a non-governmental organization, a university adult education department, a foreign donor agency and seven communities in rural KwaZulu-Natal namely, Tugela Ferry, Stoffelton, Muden, Dalton, Trust Feed, Qanda and Estcourt. The project operated for almost ten years during which adult learners from these communities were offered participation in a combination of adult basic education and livelihood projects. These communities have high levels of unemployment and poverty, and low levels of education and development, contributing to their ongoing deprivation and social exclusion (Statistics South Africa, 2003). Most had also experienced a period of devastating political violence and continuing gender-based violence within a patriarchal culture. The project aimed to create a literate, informed and active citizenry who could participate in development in their communities. Educators for the literacy classes were recruited from within these rural communities and constituted a new cadre of community-based adult educators who have been trained and supported by the NGO and university partners. The learners and educators who participated in the project were predominantly women.

In the context of the transition from Apartheid to democratic rule, a central rationale for the project was to establish literacy classes and income-generating projects within marginalised communities as spaces for people to learn and practice democracy in a micro context, as preparation for application and civic action in wider contexts. Strong emphasis on the themes of human rights, democracy and development in the literacy curriculum reflects the project's name. An important goal of this intervention was to facilitate critical reflection and dialogue amongst participants with regard to their life circumstances and their futures with a view to fostering transformative learning.

## Case study methodology in exploring the HRDD project

In 2009, the author who was employed by the university partner of the project, conducted an in-depth, qualitative study of the HRDD project study covering the first seven years of its existence, from 1999 until 2005 (John, 2009). Using case study methodology within a critical paradigm, the study sought to critically document, analyse and theorise the practices, learning and identity development within the HRDD project. The entire HRDD project served as the unit of analysis for the case study. Rule and John (2011:4) describe case study as “a systematic and in-depth investigation of a particular instance in its context in order to generate knowledge”. A major determinant of methodological choice was that a case study is able to locate and understand action most suitably within its historical, social and political contexts. Catching the complexity and situatedness of pedagogical action is a focus of this article.

Data collection for the entire case study included twenty eight in-depth interviews with learners, educators and project partners, observations and analysis of more than one hundred project documents. The process of in-depth interviewing, which generated the data which this article is based on, was guided by Seidman (1998). An initial interview focussed on the educator and his/her life history while a second interview, a week later, focussed on the educator’s understanding and experience of the HRDD project. In both interviews educators were encouraged to construct their own stories in a self-directed and open-ended fashion. Interviews were conducted in the mother-tongue of the participants (isiZulu), translated into English and then transcribed and verified.

Generating a substantial part of the data for this study in the form of narratives was underpinned by the epistemological goal of seeing the project through the eyes of different actors and to understand and theorise the project in terms of these actors’ understandings and lives. This strategy is endorsed by Rossiter and Clark (2007:3) who advise that we “make sense of our experience, day by day and across the lifespan, by putting it into story form”. Data analysis was primarily about making sense of the project through the narratives and perspectives of key participants. Content analysis of themes rather than language form was the main form of analysis, due to transformations of language form in

the translation process. The analytic process involved repeated careful readings of the data, deductive and inductive identification of themes, categorisation of themes, leading to identification of patterns between categories. The identification of themes and thematic categories in one narrative were constantly compared with such identification in other narratives.

This article focusses on findings related to the life and practices of an educator in the project, who chose the pseudonym Cosmos for the purpose of this research. The story of Cosmos was purposively selected for this article because it so ably illustrates the dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and educator practice in an attempt at transformative learning. Complex gender relations become visible when viewed from the perspective of a young male educator teaching women in a patriarchal and politically divided context. The story of Cosmos reveals the constraints on transformative learning in a post-conflict context and the vulnerabilities such educators are exposed to. While this article is based primarily on the story of Cosmos, data from three other educators in the project, namely, Khosi, Welcome and Nokthula, as well as that of a learner called Zinhle, are used to vividly portray the levels of fear, trauma and oppression generally experienced by educators and learners in this context. A brief discussion of this context is necessary for an understanding of Cosmos' story.

### **KwaZulu-Natal: a context of violence**

The province of KwaZulu-Natal, situated on the east coast of South Africa, experienced deep political division and violent power struggles during the 1980s and early 1990s. This contestation, ostensibly between the Inkatha movement (supported by the apartheid state) and the United Democratic Front which advanced the struggle of the then-banned African National Congress (ANC), manifested in some of the worst political violence in pre-democratic South Africa. According to Aitchison (2003a:47) this was a period when "thousands of people had lost their lives and homes and a deep bitterness had infected the life of the province". Dubbed the "Natal War" this period of violence claimed the lives of approximately 7500 people and left a wake of destruction and trauma (Jeffery, 1997; Aitchison, 2003a, 2003b).

This history of violence in KwaZulu-Natal and its present day effects featured significantly in the narratives of all seven educators in the study's sample, and have thus been identified by these educators as a significant frame for viewing the HRDD project. Most of the educators in the study were directly affected by the political violence either through attacks on members of their family and their homes or through threats to their own lives. Some lost family members, their homes and other possessions in the violence. A number of them had to flee their homes and take refuge in other communities, sometimes repeatedly. A young educator who chose to be called Welcome spoke of the tragic loss of four relatives which caused his family to seek refuge in another area. When violence began in their new community they decided to return to their original community, where he subsequently worked as an HRDD educator. On their return they found that their home had been taken over by another family and they were allocated a building site which was less suitable in comparison to their original one. He says:

Violence, hey, it was really very bad ...yes, it was very bad really, because four members of my family died ... my uncles and cousins. That disturbed us a lot, as we even relocated from (community 1). At (community 2) then, I also nearly died. Another organization spotted me having not attended a meeting. The following day when I was walking from school, they stopped me and asked me, "Why did you not go to that meeting?" ... I said, "I did go". They said, "Do not lie". They took out ... guns. They said, "You are fooling us, why are you lying?"... Then they asked, "What party are you"? I said, "I am not yet in parties"... Then they said, "No, go home and think carefully what you are then come back and tell us". On that very day I left, because I could see my life was, my days are over. People were being slaughtered there, just like goats. I don't really know how I escaped.

The experiences of loss and displacement have been traumatic for these educators and their relatives. These are life experiences which educators have in common with their learners. The political violence was brutal and traumatic, scarring many. The ongoing effects of the violence are visible in how people relate to each other and negotiate daily activities within development projects and other forms of community life. An element of fear often shapes such interactions. For many, the violence

is remembered and narrated as a critical event in their lives, shaping much of who they are and what they do or cannot do in the development arena. Violence generates particular frames of reference which are brought into the classroom by learners and their educators.

While the political violence has largely ended and Apartheid was defeated, the struggle for political freedom has not translated into socio-economic freedom nor into social justice. Too many of South Africa's new citizens remain in poverty and continue to struggle to meet basic needs such as food, water, health care and education (Human Sciences Research Council & Education Projects Unit, 2005). A large proportion of these people live in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, which has some of the most severe concentrations of unemployment, illiteracy, rural marginalisation and HIV infection in South Africa (Human Sciences Research Council, 2014). South Africa also has extremely high levels of gender-based violence. A woman is killed by an intimate partner every 8 hours in South Africa (Abrahams et al. 2012).

A further significant feature identified by educators in the HRDD project was that of growing up and living in a strong patriarchy. Both the history of violence and patriarchal power were presented as key features of the KwaZulu-Natal context, mediating the transformative learning potential of the HRDD project in an oppressive context marked by trauma and fear. The story of Cosmos, a young, African, male educator in the HRDD project, illustrates this mediating effect.

### **Dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and educator practice – the story of Cosmos**

This section of the article provides an in-depth analysis of how one educator, Cosmos, negotiates the relational space of the project at the level of pedagogy. Such a focus reveals the dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and educators' practices. It also reveals how Cosmos' practice is shaped (structured) and negotiated (enacted). The example of how Cosmos makes meaning of his role as an educator illustrates the value of a deeper understanding of educators' lives, particularly experiences of trauma and fear, when considering educator development and practices. It furthermore points to the importance of seeing educator development and practices as socially situated and context-bound.

The context of educators' lives and the critical events in their life histories are not just background features. They continue to shape educators' lives, beliefs and practices. At a theoretical level, such shaping could fruitfully be explored in terms of Mezirow's discussion of "frames of reference" (Mezirow, 1991) and Freire's discussion of "worldviews" and "limit situations" (Freire, 1970). Cosmos' story, a story which was not untypical of the educators who participated in the study, demonstrates how his early life experiences and his context frames his HRDD practice and how he makes meaning of his practice.

Cosmos is a single 26 year old man who lives with his mother and sister in a deeply rural part of KwaZulu-Natal. He has a child whom he supports financially but who does not live with him. Cosmos sees himself as exceptionally bright and above his fellow schoolmates in educational terms. He passed his school-leaving examination with good results and wanted to become an accountant. This dream had been frustrated by his family's poor financial circumstances. His mother is a farmworker who is illiterate and who earns a small income. On the basis of his results, his school principal suggested that he consider becoming a teacher but he says that he did not want to become a school teacher. He prefers teaching adults because, "they know why they are learning". Cosmos said that the HRDD work brings "small money" and some recognition in the community.

The first of two interviews with Cosmos was strongly framed by the painful experience of his early life (pre-HRDD) and the consequences of his parents' divorce and his father's polygamy. This led to his rejection by his father and is seen as the reason for his inability to study further and the lack of resources in his home. Cosmos spent a considerable part of the interview talking about his parents' divorce and his sense of abandonment and how much this affected him in the past and continues to affect him in psychological and material terms (see John, 2009).

Based on his own extensive narrative, Cosmos's reflections on the critical events of his father divorcing his mother, rejecting him as a child and supporting only his first wife, reveals that these life events constituted a significant trauma for Cosmos. These events have influenced Cosmos' perspectives on divorce, polygamy and women's rights, which present some ambiguity and contradictions when lined up

against project goals. On women's rights and gender equality, Cosmos believes that teaching women to assert their equal status in the home could lead to domestic problems and divorce. He believes that rural men will not accept this. He has therefore resolved this tension by teaching women to believe that they are equal but to keep this to themselves. He explains:

... we teach our learners about human rights ... even in the books they say people are all equal. But people here, especially the men, don't accept that. They [men] say, "I can't be equal to you, because you left your home to live with me and I paid a lobola [bride price] for you. So you are not equal to me". So that is something they don't accept. So we have ... now advised our learners not to use that right, because it causes a split between them in their marriage

What Cosmos appears to be attempting with his learners is information sharing and a muted form of personal transformation which neither allows for action nor contributes to social transformation. From his own experience as a child, Cosmos has learnt that divorce is not a good thing. He does not want his learners to face the prospect of divorce because of what he has to teach them. This is a tension between the text and context of the HRDD curriculum. What Cosmos' experience of his parents' divorce adds to the curriculum equation is a subtext which causes him to believe that educating women about their rights should not lead to divorce. Such subtext features, the ways in which educators mediate the text and context with their own life-world understandings is often invisible in educational projects and not available to the planning processes.

The above example also illustrates the importance of "communal forms of living" and the "relational realities" identified in the Afrocentric perspective of learning set out by Ntseane (2012:275). Such a perspective stands in contrast to a Western perspective which values autonomy and independence. Mezirow (cited by Merriam and Nsteane, 2008:185) indicates this latter perspective when stating that the "cardinal goal of adult education" is to enable adults to make "more autonomous and informed choices". However, Cosmos' adult education goal is governed by a collective rather than an individual sense of

responsibility. Merriam and Ntseane (2008) identify this sense of responsibility as a feature of African value systems and learning.

Some of the subtexts align with project goals and values, others jar with them. There is a further example of a strong subtext feature which Cosmos brings to his class, which jars with project goals. As discussed earlier, the community context in which Cosmos teaches has a recent history of deep political divisions which manifested in deadly violence over a number of years. Intolerance and fear prevail. Political identities are strong in this context, perhaps stronger than identities of educator and learner. The learning environment and curriculum faces challenges and doubts regarding its political character and motives. To reduce the overt politicization of the classroom, Cosmos has requested that his learners not wear the T-shirts of their political organizations when attending class. He explains:

So people who support (party A) here, they think we are preaching to our learners to join (party B). So now we have realised that there is a need for us as teachers to tell our learners that they must not wear (party) t-shirts in our classes, or even in the street because people think we, we teach them to wear those things they are wearing ... So, we are very, very committed to teach. We are advising them not to wear t-shirts in our classes, even in the street, unless they are going to meet their comrades in rallies or in meetings.

The history of violence and current political power struggles make it difficult for educators to forge relationships which facilitate their HRDD work. A female educator, Khosi, also explained how the political divide and suspicion affects her HRDD work:

Since I am under another Inkosi [traditional leader] there are people of this area who do not understand what I am doing here ... Some people have a tendency of thinking that I work for political parties.

In a project which aims to foster tolerance, respect for diversity, rights to freedom of association and speech, Cosmos' actions could be seen to be counter-productive and not serving the democratic and transformative goals of the project. However, in a context where an educator has

personal experience of people being killed because of their political affiliation and where his own political identity is under scrutiny, it can be expected that he would not want to take many risks, irrespective of the importance of these within the curriculum text. Cosmos has to find a way of giving expression to a curriculum promoting freedom and transformation within a context of fear. This is clearly no easy task.

Cosmos' story highlights the importance of focussing not just on education practice and its reifications such as the "official HRDD curriculum" but also on the actors in the practice. In doing so we are able to better understand Cosmos and his practice, and we may consider the tension in the multiple identities he holds. Kilgore and Bloom (2002:123) also note that in contexts of crisis, the "fragmented self is a more appropriate organizing structure". Cosmos has a pre-HRDD identity of a young man disowned by his father in a polygamous and fractured family system, as well as an HRDD educator identity with enactments of attempting transformative learning about rights and gender equality. Such identities are difficult to blend into a unified sense of self. Through Cosmos' in-depth narrative we can observe multiple identities and more importantly, we can observe how life history and context can blunt the transformative edge of the HRDD project!

### **A socio-political milieu of fear and trauma**

Cosmos' story reveals the enormous challenges encountered when attempting transformative learning in a socio-political milieu of fear and trauma. South African society is characterised by a well-entrenched system of patriarchy and gender inequality. Women face substantial discrimination, domination and abuse in this system. Rural KwaZulu-Natal presents some of the clearest evidence of this system in all arenas of life, particularly in family and community relations, but also within the educational arena (Human Sciences Research Council & Education Projects Unit, 2005; John, 2009).

The majority of learners in the HRDD project were women who experienced multiple forms of discrimination and oppression. Consider for example the case of the learner Zinhle, who offered a poignant and critical assessment regarding the termination of her primary education:

My father was primitive; he believed that girls should not be sent to school ... I left school in [my] second year, I didn't even finish it. I thought I would not continue because my father said he cannot spend his money educating me for someone else [reference to a future husband].

Nokthula, an educator in the project also experienced disruption to her schooling as a result of fear and trauma:

We stayed in our shack ... behind the Stadium... violence erupted. Where I was staying....whenever I went to school there were these boys who were always asking me why I was not coming to them when they were calling me. They accused me of being anti-ANC... One day they decided to necklace [burning a person to death] me with a car tyre ...fortunately there was a person who was my mother's friend...that person saw me....the painful part is that eventually they killed that person. My mother decided that we should leave ... since she was about to lose me too. We came here ...in 1992. It was difficult for me at school. I think my mind was disturbed because I did not pass. I repeated ... Eventually I passed standard 9 until I found myself passing standard ten.

Most of the educators in the project were women, like Nokthula. They were employed and trained to facilitate learning and change with learners such as Zinhle. They were expected to tackle gender-based discrimination and to foster conscientisation, critical reflection and empowerment (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1975), in order that learners could take action to address different forms of oppression they faced as women. The human rights, democracy and development focus in the HRDD project foregrounded the rights of women. However, most of the educators had themselves experienced and continued to experience quite severe forms of gender-based discrimination and violence. It is quite likely that many educators had not been able to fully overcome their own oppression as women and yet were attempting to foster change in the lives of their learners through education. How effective can educators be in facilitating transformative learning when they themselves have not been able to shed gender-based frames of reference which limit women? This study highlights the challenges of using community-based educators who themselves have experienced

and are experiencing violence and oppression as change agents for transformative learning. Educators, as indicated in the case of Cosmos, are struggling to reconcile their own trauma and personal histories of struggle with project goals and discourses. More attention should be given to this dynamic in educator development work and in programmes inspired by transformative learning theory.

With a sense of the powerful interplay between context, life experience and educator practice, the article now engages with some of the earlier-mentioned critique of transformative learning theory in the light of Cosmos' story.

### **Engaging the critique of transformative learning theory via Cosmos' story**

While Taylor's (1997, 2007) reviews show that a number of studies confirmed Mezirow's model of perspective transformation, he does however indicate that there were additional aspects not considered by the model. Some of the studies reviewed signalled the need for considerations of the role of intense emotions and prior stressful life events, of readiness factors for change, of non-rational ways of knowing such as intuition, empathy and spirituality, and of the centrality of positive relationships in transformative learning. Taylor (1997:55) also identified the need for transformative learning,

... to be explored at a more in-depth level, providing greater understanding of the varying nature of the catalyst of the learning process (disorienting dilemma), the significant influence of context (personal and social factors), the minimization of the role of critical reflection and increased role of other ways of knowing.

All of these findings from Taylor's (1997, 2007) critical reviews pointed to the need for a more holistic and contextually grounded view of transformative learning with greater attention paid to affect and emotional engagement and to barriers in the socio-political milieu of learning. These dimensions of learning are vividly illustrated in the story of Cosmos. More importantly, while the learner is the focus in Taylor's review when arguing for the need for further development of the theory, the findings of the study of the HRDD project draw attention to the educator and how in-depth understanding of the educator's

emotions, stressful life events and readiness for change may influence the transformative learning process. As much as transformative learning is premised on an autonomous learner, it also tends to be premised on an autonomous and transformed educator who can act as an agent of change. In oppressive contexts, marked by fear and trauma, this is not a given. Furthermore, transformative learning can be highly risky work and vulnerable educators, not organisations, are the ones who must face the brunt of such risk.

Newman (1994) asserted that transformative learning theory had not provided answers for how transformative learning could occur in the context of systemic oppression and for how it could contribute to political struggle. Newman's disappointment stems largely from the neglect of social action, particularly collective social action, in transformative learning theory. He drew attention to Mezirow's acknowledgement that adult educators could only help facilitate emancipatory education which led to personal transformation. In a response entitled, "Transformation theory out of context", Mezirow (1997) contended that personal transformation triggered by a disorienting dilemma occurred through a three part process: critical reflection of assumptions (meaning perspectives), reflective discourse to validate insight, and action. Mezirow's (1997) view is that in conditions of oppression, the individual and/or collective action taken by the learner should be under the learner's own direction and terms. He also argued that collective social action was a special competence for which adult educators needed training. This study shows that training on its own may not be sufficient. Cosmos and his fellow educators received considerable training during the life of the project. Furthermore, negotiating the tricky political terrain of a post-conflict context is onerous for young educators.

Taking an in-depth look at an educator's practice via Cosmos' narratives provided significant insights into the severe barriers to collective action. Fear and traumatic life history feature in this case as necessary dimensions to understanding educator practices. We see how Cosmos negotiates the learning-action dimensions of his practice. His account, of a central human rights issue about gender equality involved reflection (including painful self-reflection) and some dialogue but it did not lead to action. In fact, Cosmos' practice purposely discourages and disables

transformative social action. Was Cosmos' inability to effect collective social action a consequence of insufficient training?

Taylor (1997, 2007) has presented transformative learning theory as a theory still in development. Importantly, Taylor also noted that few studies have considered the influence of cultural background on transformative learning, leaving key determinants such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation and marginalization largely unexplored. This conclusion heightens the contribution which the case study of the HRDD project offers to the literature on transformative learning theory.

## **Conclusion**

Transformative learning theory enjoys considerable support in adult education practice and research. However, studies of transformative learning theory appear to be based largely on Western contexts with middle class samples and, on occasion, working class samples. The so-called underclass, the poor, marginalised and oppressed sectors of society, rarely feature in studies of transformative learning. In other words, transformative learning theory has not been adequately interrogated in contexts of ongoing deprivation, violence and oppression. Examination of the theory in such contexts, where trauma and fear are prevalent, could contribute to the ongoing development of transformative learning theory and practice. The study of the HRDD project highlights the value of more situated explorations of transformative learning involving more diverse contexts and samples.

Furthermore, while Taylor (2008:12) has correctly advised that "it is important to appreciate the role of life experience among learners", it is clearly also important to pay attention to the life experiences and identities of the educator in the transformative learning process, as these factors are powerful shapers of pedagogical practices. The use of community-based educators in post-conflict contexts draws attention to the needs of educators in terms of their personal healing, programme training and ongoing support in their work. Clearly, part of such preparation requires supporting educators to become more aware of the influence of their own experiences, frames of reference and the power of their own biases. The story of Cosmos shows that the transformative potential of a curriculum is a product of the dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and educator practice. This has

implications for how one plans educational interventions which have transformative agendas.

## References

- Abrahams, N., Mathews, S., Jewkes R., Martin, L.J. & Lombard, C. (2012) 'Every Eight Hours: Intimate femicide in South Africa 10 years later!', South African Medical Research Council, Research Brief, August 2012, Viewed 30 September 2014, <<http://www.mrc.ac.za/policybriefs/everyighthours.pdf>>
- Aitchison, J. (2003a) 'The origins of the Midlands war: the Natal conflict from 1975 to 1989' in R. Greenstein (ed.) *The Role of Political Violence in South Africa's Democratization*, Johannesburg: CASE, 47–72.
- Aitchison, J. (2003b) 'KwaZulu-Natal: the pre-election wars of the 1990s' in R. Greenstein (ed.) *The Role of Political Violence in South Africa's Democratization*, Johannesburg: CASE, 72–94.
- Apte, J. (2009) 'Facilitating transformative learning: a framework for practice', in *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 49: 1, 169–189.
- Bennetts, C. (2003) 'The Impact of Transformational Learning on Individuals, Families and Communities', in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22:5, 457–480.
- Cranton, P. (1994) *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.
- Cranton, P. (1996) *Professional Development as Transformative Learning: New Perspectives for Teachers of Adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cranton, P. & Taylor, E.W. (2012) 'Transformative Learning Theory: seeking a more unified theory' in E.W. Taylor, P. Cranton and Associates (eds.) *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 3–20.
- Christie, M., Carey, M., Robertson, A. & Grainger, P. (2015) 'Putting transformative learning theory into practice', in *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 55:1, 9–30.
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Human Sciences Research Council. (2014) *South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey, 2012*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Human Sciences Research Council & Education Projects Unit. (2005) *Emerging Voices: A Report on Education in South African Rural Communities*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Inglis, T. (1997) 'Empowerment and Emancipation', in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48:1, 3–18.
- Jeffery, A. (1997) *The Natal Story: Sixteen Years of Conflict*. Johannesburg:

- South African Institute of Race Relations.
- John, V. M. (2009) "Communities of Learning and Action?": A Case Study of the Human Rights, Democracy and Development Project, 1999 – 2005. Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.
- Kilgore, D. & Bloom, L.R. (2002) "When I'm Down, it Takes Me a While": Rethinking Transformational Education Through Narratives of Women in Crisis', in *Adult Basic Education*, 12:3, 123-133.
- Magro, K. and Polyzoi, E. (2009) 'Geographical and psychological terrains of adults from war-affected backgrounds', in *Journal of Transformative Education*, 7:1, 85-106.
- Memela, B. & Land, S. (2006) 'Isicathamiya saseStoffelton: Reflections on an Education for Democracy Project', in *Journal of Education*, 39, 47-62.
- Merriam, S.B. & Ntseane, G. (2008) 'Transformational Learning in Botswana: How Culture Shapes the Process', in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58:3, 183-197.
- Mezirow, J. (1997) 'Transformation Theory Out of Context', in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48, 60-62.
- Mezirow, J. (1998) 'Transformative Learning and Social Action: A Response to Inglis', in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 49:1, 70-72.
- Mezirow, J. (1975) *Education for Perspective Transformation: Women's Re-entry Programs in Community Colleges*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Magro, K. and Polyzoi, E. (2009) 'Geographical and psychological terrains of adults from war-affected backgrounds', in *Journal of Transformative Education*, 7:1, 85-106.
- Newman, M. (1994) *Defining the Enemy: Adult Education in Social Action*. Sydney: Stewart Victor.
- Newman, M. (2014) 'Calling Transformative Learning Into Question: Some Mutinous Thoughts', in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62:1 36-55.
- Ntseane, G.P. (2011) 'Culturally sensitive transformational learning: incorporating the Afrocentric paradigm and African Feminism', in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 61:4, 307-323.
- Ntseane, G.P. (2012) 'Transformative learning theory: a perspective from Africa' in E.W. Taylor, P. Cranton and Associates (eds.) *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 274-288.
- Rossiter, M. & Clark, M.C. (2007) *Narrative and the practice of adult education*. Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company.

- Rule, P. & John, V. (2011) *Your guide to case study research*. Pretoria: van Schaik.
- Statistics South Africa. (2003) *Census 2001. Census in brief. Second edition*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
- Seidman, I. (1998) *Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. (2nd ed.) New York: Teachers College Press.
- Stake, R. (1995) *The Art of Case Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Taylor, E. W. (1997) 'Building Upon the Theoretical Debate: A Critical Review of the Empirical Studies of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory', in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48:1, 34-59.
- Taylor, E. W. (2001) 'Transformative Learning Theory: A Neurobiological Perspective of the Role of Emotions and Unconscious Ways of Knowing', in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20:3, 218-236.
- Taylor, E.W. (2007) 'An Update of Transformative Learning Theory: A Critical Review of the Empirical Research (1999-2005)', in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26:2, 173-191.
- Taylor, E.W. (2008) 'Transformative Learning Theory', in *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 119, 5-15.
- Taylor, E.W., Duveskog, D. & Friis-Hansen, E. (2012) 'Fostering transformative learning in non-formal settings: farmer-Field Schools in East Africa', in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 31:6, 725-742.
- Taylor, E.W. & Snyder, M.J. (2012) 'A Critical Review of Research on Transformative Learning Theory, 2006-2010' in E.W. Taylor, P. Cranton and Associates (eds.) *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 37-55.

## About the Author

**Dr Vaughn M. John** is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. His teaching and research interests are in Adult Learning, Peace Education, HIV & AIDS and Education, and Research Methodology.

## Contact details

*Vaughn M. John  
School of Education,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa 3201*

*Email: johnv@ukzn.ac.za*