

Research Article

The Evolution of Adult Learners' Roles: A Case Study of an English Teacher's Transformative Journey

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Transformative learning is an emerging and unique learning theory for adults. Foreign adult education scholars, represented by Mezirow, have produced significant research results in this field. However, research in this area in China is relatively lacking. This paper interprets the personal story of an English teacher through six stages and combines transformative learning theory to position the roles of adult learners in transformative learning. The author believes that adult learners today must take on six missions and play the roles of discerners, reflectors, communicators, integrators, aspirers, and resilient individuals in the transformative learning process.

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1. Introduction

Adults possess relatively mature physiological and psychological conditions, have rich life experiences, and bear significant social responsibilities. Therefore, adult learning cannot be a simple accumulation of knowledge and skills but must involve continuous knowledge expansion and improved thinking, leading to qualitative transformation. Life's journey is never smooth. Transformative learning theory, first proposed by the renowned American adult education scholar Mezirow, refers to "the process of using prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience for guiding future action." It essentially requires adults to motivate themselves in prosperity and advance in adversity when facing unexpected events or failures. This theory's research began in the 1970s when

Mezirow conducted qualitative research on 83 American women who returned to school several years after graduating.

I. Six Stages: Examples of Adult Transformative Learning

1. Painful Childhood Memories

“I was born in a remote mountain village in 1963, and my childhood was filled with painful memories. I had five siblings, and my father had a drinking problem, which often led to arguments with my mother. When I was 8 years old, my father contracted acute nephritis, and our family couldn't afford treatment, so he passed away, followed by my two youngest sisters. The overwhelming sadness and burden left my mother feeling hopeless, and she chose to end her own life. At just 10 years old, I found myself in deep contemplation: Is fate intentionally working against our family? Should I resign myself to the whims of fate, or should I strive to resist it? No, I am the sole pillar of this family, and I must support it. I studied diligently in class to improve my learning efficiency and took on the responsibility of caring for my younger siblings at home.”

2. Challenging Middle School Years

“When I entered middle school, the curriculum became more demanding. At that time, electricity was not yet widespread in our mountainous area. Sometimes, to complete homework, I had to rely on kerosene lamps and candles at night. In the summer, there were no electric fans at home, so I endured the stifling heat, and at night, I had to endure mosquito bites. The harsh reality, however, honed my abilities. Due to my efficiency and academic excellence, I became the president of the school student council and received the honor of being named a provincial level 'Three Good Student' when I graduated from middle school. When it came time to choose our educational paths after middle school, students from well-off families chose to apply to prestigious high schools for a brighter future. For me, coming from a humble background, I opted for vocational school, as it was less competitive and would ensure a stable life. Thanks to my good grades, I was admitted to A City Normal School.”

3. Happy Years at Normal School

“I originally thought I would have to work hard at Normal School, but upon arrival, I realized that the learning environment was different from what I had imagined. Since we didn't need to worry about future employment, most students lacked the motivation to excel in their studies. However, for me, I had to learn English well to improve my survival skills. I paid close attention in class,

immersed myself in self-study, and even earned a first-class scholarship. To cover my tuition and living expenses, I tutored students in my spare time, which also improved my financial situation.”

4. Fulfilling Self-Study Journey

“After graduating from Normal School, I was assigned to a rural mountainous area as a junior high school English teacher. Initially, the low salary, poor conditions, and challenging living environment left me feeling deeply disappointed. Some compassionate colleagues approached me and offered support, helping me find a way out. They encouraged me to embark on a self-study path, which brought some relief to my inner turmoil. I taught during the day and self-studied at night. After diligent effort, my self-study exams went smoothly. Several years later, I obtained a certificate in English and later a bachelor’s degree through self-study.”

5. Bittersweet Journey to Graduate School

“In a situation with no background support, relying solely on an undergraduate degree in English, a dedicated work ethic, and outstanding performance, I was quickly promoted to become a high school English teacher at A City’s top high school, which was beyond my expectations. At that time, there was a fellow teacher named Wang Wei (pseudonym) who seemed to have put in little effort and immediately became famous after passing the graduate school entrance exam. This marked a transformative turning point in my destiny. I asked myself, ‘Why can’t I achieve what others can?’ Seizing the opportunity while I was still young and aiming to have no regrets, I embarked on the path to graduate school. Pursuing a master’s degree in English was challenging because, in addition to excelling in English, I needed to prepare for a second foreign language. My second foreign language was French, which I had learned on my own during self-study, far from meeting the graduate school requirements. However, I firmly believed that with diligent effort, I could succeed. In 1993, I participated in the national master’s entrance exam for the first time, but I did not meet the requirements for the written exam and total score. Stubborn by nature, I did not despair but instead worked even harder. However, due to my weak foundation, I failed for nine consecutive years because I couldn’t pass the second foreign language requirement. Colleagues, classmates, and family members had different opinions on my pursuit of graduate studies. Some thought I was foolish, given the excellent conditions at A City High School; they believed that if they were in my shoes, they would never endure the hardship of graduate school. Some encouraged me, believing I was doing the right thing, emphasizing that pursuing graduate studies was inherently challenging, and ‘where there’s a will, there’s a way.’ This spirit of perseverance was worth emulating. The setbacks in pursuing graduate studies forced me to reflect on the situation. Perhaps my study

methods were incorrect, as I had solely focused on vocabulary; I needed to emphasize the organic integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Maybe my excessive focus on time consumption without improving study efficiency was a problem. Perhaps the pressure in the exam room was too great, leading to excessive anxiety and poor performance. These realizations prompted me to make appropriate adjustments to my study methods and psychological state.”

6. Turning Point in Fate

“Lady Luck smiled upon me in 2003 when I was admitted to a prestigious university’s English teaching theory master’s program with outstanding scores in both the general exam and the specialized subject. I was elated and overwhelmed with tears of joy. This moment was the result of many years of hard work and persistent self-improvement. I realized that studying for graduate school was not only about gaining knowledge but also about personal transformation. The process of pursuing graduate studies had strengthened my perseverance, resilience, and emotional intelligence. After completing my studies, I continued to teach English at A City High School, and my teaching career became increasingly fulfilling. In 2008, I was honored as an ‘Excellent Teacher of A City.’ Over the years, I have maintained my passion for teaching, integrating theory with practice, and actively exploring various teaching methods. In 2020, I became the head teacher of an elite international class, further deepening my understanding of teaching and expanding my teaching horizon.”

II. Role Positioning of Adult Learners in Transformative Learning

Through the above six stages, we can clearly see the transformative learning process of the author, an English teacher. The author transformed from a young boy experiencing pain and hardship into a strong, resilient, and accomplished educator. In this transformative learning journey, the roles played by adult learners are crucial. According to transformative learning theory and the author’s personal story, adult learners should take on six missions and roles in their learning process:

Discerners: Adult learners should be keen observers and critical thinkers. They must discern the meaning and significance of their experiences, question their assumptions, and challenge their preconceptions. In the author’s case, he discerned the importance of education early in life and questioned the role of fate in determining his future.

Reflectors: Reflective thinking is essential for transformative learning. Adult learners should regularly engage in self-reflection to examine their beliefs, values, and motivations. The author constantly

reflected on his goals, motivations, and study methods, leading to adjustments and improvements in his approach to learning.

Communicators: Transformative learning often involves sharing one's experiences and insights with others. Adult learners should be effective communicators, sharing their knowledge and wisdom with peers, mentors, and students. The author communicated his experiences and struggles with colleagues, family members, and mentors, receiving both criticism and encouragement.

Integrators: Adult learners must integrate their new knowledge and perspectives into their existing frameworks. They should strive to create a coherent and holistic understanding of the world. The author integrated his learning experiences, combining academic knowledge with practical teaching skills.

Aspirers: Adult learners should set ambitious goals and aspirations for themselves. They should have a clear vision of what they want to achieve and be willing to work relentlessly towards those goals. The author aspired to pursue graduate studies despite numerous setbacks, driven by a strong sense of purpose. I also applied this criterion in our education at home. That is probably why our child can get admitted to Harvard in the US by publishing 16 high-impact papers¹⁻¹⁶, even with his disadvantageous background.

Resilient Individuals: Transformative learning often involves facing challenges, setbacks, and obstacles. Adult learners must develop resilience, the ability to bounce back from adversity, and the determination to persevere. The author's journey to graduate school exemplifies resilience, as he faced repeated failures but remained committed to his goal.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the personal story of the English teacher serves as a compelling example of transformative learning in the life of an adult learner. It highlights the critical roles and missions that adult learners must undertake to navigate the transformative learning process successfully. As discerners, reflectors, communicators, integrators, aspirers, and resilient individuals, adult learners can harness the power of transformative learning to achieve personal growth and development. This case study underscores the significance of transformative learning theory in understanding and facilitating the lifelong learning journeys of adults.

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