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Formation,
Transformative Learning,
& Theological Education

Christine Alison Sorensen

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Abstract

This research applied Mezirow’s transformative learning theory to theological education, in particular in situations where theological education is concerned with the purpose of formation. A field study among minority Christian women attending a Bible school in Pakistan found that the transformative pedagogy contributed to the formational aspects of the theological education programme and helped to integrate the fragmented curriculum, and the separation of theology and spirituality.

Students’ epistemological, theological, and personal assumptions were identified at the beginning of the course and changes in these assumptions tracked over the year of study. Five areas of formation, namely relationship with God, thinking theologically, communicating the gospel, relationships with others, and self-understanding, were identified as a way of assessing how changes in assumptions impacted on formational change.

Transformation occurred over the range of assumptions and areas of formation. Students’ assumption change was found to be idiosyncratic, responding to the transformative environment created by the teachers, according to particular developmental and formational needs students had. Fostering reflective ability, and the inclusion of reflection activities, as well as mentoring, contributed to students’ formation in the use of transformative learning pedagogy. Transformative learning proved effective even among students with less developed cognitive ability.

The South Asian earthquake of 2005 was a significant trigger event which impacted on student formation in developing care and concern, understanding ministry, theodicy, and in developing epistemological complexity. Implications for further research on the use of transformative learning in different theological education settings, and to compare changes over a longer term are also considered.
Acknowledgements

This thesis has only been completed due to the support of many people and I wish to acknowledge them here.

I express my grateful thanks to students of the United Bible Training Centre, Gujranwala, Pakistan who shared their lives, struggles and triumphs in their formational journey. Thank you to my former colleagues, teachers at the UBTC, for your readiness to explore a new way of teaching and responding to the needs of students, and for sharing with me your discoveries. Thanks to all of you for your honesty and openness. I also express my thanks to the Chairperson Mrs Pamela Lal, and the Governing Board of the UBTC, who allowed me to conduct my field research at the centre, and to Mrs. Salma Andrew the Principal, for all her co-operation.

I have deeply appreciated the complementary perspectives of my supervisors, Dr. Ann Gilroy and Dr. Richard Hamilton, and all they have contributed to the shape of this thesis. I thank them for their enthusiasm, encouragement, and guidance, for a great working relationship, and for the grasp of broad concept and attention to detail.

I also express my warm thanks to the Head of Department Professor Elaine Wainwright, postgraduate director Dr Allan Davidson, and the staff Mrs. Pervin Medhora and Mrs. Audrea Warner, of the School of Theology at University of Auckland, for all their encouragement. The doctoral theology students informal reading group provided encouragement in our various research projects and I thank you all for that support. Thanks also to the staff of the Student Learning Centre, especially Dr Susan Carter, for practical guidance from the beginning to end stages of putting it all together. I record grateful thanks to The University of Auckland for the doctoral scholarship which provided the financial means for me to concentrate on my study. Others have also given me financial support and I am grateful to you.

In August 2001 I met Sue Cross, who introduced me to transformative learning theory. Thank you, Sue, for your friendship, for reading through an early draft, and your helpful comments and encouragement. I am also grateful to my sister Margie Sorensen for her editorial comments after reading an early draft, and to the final proof-reading team for many and varied comments and corrections.

Finally I express thanks to my family for their love and encouragement. I have received so much personal support from friends, members of the St. Heliers Presbyterian church and particularly my home group there, and Interserve, who by their interest and friendship kept me going on the journey. Thank you.
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  Students’ interviews
  The weekly reflection sheet
Introduction

I thank God; God did it (Razia FI)

[Change occurs] when people themselves try to change (Hamida II)

So I am so thankful to [UBTC teachers] that they worked hard so that change would happen in me - otherwise I would not have changed. (Mumtaz MI)1

Razia, Hamida, and Mumtaz, three students of the United Bible Training Centre, Gujranwala, Pakistan, attribute their transformation during the course of theological education to three different possibilities. Razia ascribes the change in her life solely to the action of God. In theological terms change does occur by the grace of God working in individual lives, but Razia does not think through this change to try to understand how and why it happened. Hamida’s comment reflects her effort in responding to the impulses for change that she encountered during her course of study. Hamida draws attention to formation as an outcome of students’ motivation and readiness to change, and their own effort and perseverance. Mumtaz assigns the credit for the change in her life to the work of the teachers in helping her to work through formation issues. She is pointing to the formational influence on students of the theological education environment.

The current discussion about formation in theological education makes clear that there is an underlying assumption in educators’ minds that there is something that happens, or that should happen, in theological education itself that engenders formation in students. Formation is a complex issue and encompasses the work of God in individual lives, the individual’s own efforts to change, and faculty providing an environment conducive to change. Even when a theological training centre provides an optimum environment for growth, students still respond differently. The student’s own prior formation, experience, and psychological preferences mediate the kind of influences that come to bear on her in a change process.2 Students bring specific backgrounds, skills and abilities to their experience of theological education, along with their own assumptions,

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1 References to student responses from the field research study use pseudonyms. See chapter four page 124 - 129 for a full explanation of referencing of field research data.

2 As my work is among women I will use feminine pronouns for theological students, although this can be understood as gender inclusive in general discussion about theological education.
Introduction

limitations, and concerns, with varying formational needs. The particular developmental pathway that a student is currently traversing, her social development and relationship issues, her cognitive development and readiness to reflect on her growth and change, and her relationship with God and faith development, are other aspects that make discussion of formation multi-faceted and complex.

My own interest and experience regarding formation arise from my involvement in theological education, chiefly at the United Bible Training Centre (UBTC) in Gujranwala, Pakistan, as a teacher from 1987 until 1990 and as Principal from 1990 until 2003. UBTC is an interdenominational centre established in 1939 to teach young women of the minority Christian community in Pakistan about their faith, and train them for a variety of ministries. The most fulfilling part of my work in the centre was to see young women, trainee staff and students, develop and become more confident as they understood their faith, and how that faith impacted on their lives and the larger contexts of their existence. This thesis about formation, transformative learning, and theological education arises out of those years of working in theological education, of seeing young women mature in life, faith, and ministry, and of wanting to do all I could as a theological educator to provide an environment that would enhance their growth.

My thinking about theological education is influenced by my experience in theological colleges in New Zealand, North America, and Pakistan, as student, teacher, mentor, administrator, and Board member, and additionally through extensive reading and discussion. My involvement in local church ministry also affects my understanding of theological education.

I approach the concern regarding formation in theological education from adult educational theory, and in particular transformative learning theory. Transformative learning is an adult education theory which explains how adults make meaning of their lives, especially where differences in systems of understanding conflict with new experiences or knowledge. Jack Mezirow, the founding researcher in transformative learning, describes the theory in this way:

[Transformative learning is] the process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive,
Transformative learning theory explains resistance to formation in terms of the deeply held and unarticulated assumptions that make up the way people look at the world and respond to it. Change is addressed by the articulation and evaluation of these previously unexamined assumptions, leading to reframed assumptions which result in changed behaviour.

Transformative learning responds to a formation related concern in theological education, where students’ lives may show a conflict between unexamined assumptions about what they believe and how they live, and the theology they may study. The philosophical background of transformative learning theory and the practical understanding of how change occurs are accessible to theological education practice.

This research is situated within a Christian evangelical theological tradition. The concern with formation is one of the distinctive characteristics of evangelical theological education. Lawson adds two other features, apart from formation, which characterise evangelical theological education: the authority of the Christian scriptures, and the place given to classic Christian doctrines, especially those related to redemption through Jesus Christ. These features are consistent with four elements evangelical historian David Bebbington distinguishes as common to the strands of the evangelical movement. The strands he identifies are the individual and personal nature of a salvific relationship with God, the imperative to be involved in mission and ministry, the importance of the Scriptures and the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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Introduction

When I was first introduced to transformative learning theory I thought intuitively that this theory offered a possible approach to formation within a theological education setting. The first section of this thesis is an articulation of the assumptions that lay behind my initial intuition. In chapter one I investigate my own understanding of theological education and formation, outlining major constraints on formation in theological education and how they are currently being addressed. In chapter two I consider transformative learning theory and explore how it could engage with evangelical theological education. In chapter three I briefly survey theories of development and the overlap between the ideas relating to formation and the structures that are in focus when developmental change is occurring.

The second section of the thesis focuses on my field research. I investigated what kinds of assumptions theological students brought to their studies and whether a transformative learning pedagogy would foster change in these assumptions. I also investigated the effect of student epistemology on the effectiveness of transformative learning. In chapter four I outline my research methodology to explore these questions. In chapter five I describe the kinds of change that students from the UBTC Gujranwala made in their assumptions over a range of personal and theological issues, and I discuss how that can be understood as formation. In chapter six I identify and discuss the elements that contributed to these assumption changes. In particular I evaluate how the use of a transformative learning pedagogy has contributed to student formation. Finally I draw some conclusions from the research study regarding the effectiveness of transformative learning and discuss how transformative learning could be used in other situations in theological education.