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Formation,

Transformative Learning,

& Theological Education

Christine Alison Sorensen

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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.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ..... **ii**
Acknowledgements ..... **iii**

Introduction **1**

One ~ Theological Education **5**
Theological education: some parameters to the discussion 5
Defining formation 7
The need for intentional formation 11
Factors mitigating against formation 13
Prior student formation 13
Philosophical underpinnings 15
Curricular fragmentation 20
Restoring the practice of formation 24
Reuniting rational and extra-rational, theology and spirituality 25
Educational and Curricular changes 27
Reflection as a pedagogical method 32
Conclusion 38

Two ~ Transformative Learning **42**
Transformative Learning: an overview 42
Philosophical background 43
Transformative learning and adult development 45
Meaning-making 45
Structures of Meaning 46
Transformations 51
Processes of change 52
An Activating Event 54
Articulating Assumptions 56
Critical self-reflection 56
Being open to alternative viewpoints 59
Engaging in discourse 59
Revising assumptions and perspectives 60
Acting on Revisions 60
The place of the teacher in transformative learning 61
Empowering students for change 61
Mentoring 62
Ethical considerations 64
Spirituality and Transformative learning 65
Spirituality, transformative learning, and theological education 67
Critiquing Transformative learning 71
The need for more empirical research 75
Cross-cultural critique: Transformative Learning in Pakistan and the Middle East 75

Evangelical Theological Critique....77
Conclusion....82

Three ~ Formation and Development....84
Adult Development....84
'Development' and 'Formation'....86
Cognitive development....88
Women's Ways of Knowing....89
The Reflective Judgement Model....92
Socio-Personal Development....97
Moral development....102
Faith Development....105
Fowler's Stages of Faith....106
Faith development and formation....109
Conclusion....113

Four ~ Methodology....117
Study Location: United Bible Training Centre, Pakistan....118
Participants....121
Staff Members....121
Student participants....122
Process of research....124
Ethics Approval....124
Research trips to Pakistan....124
Research programme schedule....125
Staff training and participation....126
Student research process....126
Data analysis....130
Critical issues: validity and reliability....131
Internal validity....131
Reliability....132

Five ~ Changes in Student Assumptions....133
Assumptions regarding the purpose of theological education....134
Individual Case Study: Saima....138
Epistemology....138
Self-concept and identity issues....140
Theological issues....143
Epistemological Assumptions....147
Pre-reflective epistemologies....149
Quasi-reflective epistemology....152
Reflective Epistemology....153
A Christianised epistemology....155
Epistemological development....156
Individual Case Study: Tahira....160

Epistemology....160
Identity....161
Family....162
Relationships among students:....164
Theological Assumptions....165
Faith....166
Personal change: psychological assumptions....168
Christian community identity....169
Female Identity....170
Family and Identity formation....172
Identity formation....173
Building relationships....174
Anger....178
Theological Assumptions....182
Images of God....182
Prayer....188
Forgiveness....190
Ministry....194
Relationships with the majority community....196
Faith....197
Summary: Student transformations....200

Six ~ Teaching Transformatively....205
Putting theory into practice: the phases of transformative learning....208
The activating event....208
Recursive aspects of the transformative learning process....220
Articulating assumptions....220
Critical self-reflection....223
Alternate viewpoints....228
Revising assumptions....233
Change in action....234
Issues on the phases of transformative learning....237
The South Asian Earthquake: a special case study....243
Trigger event: Initial Response is Fear....244
Processing the disaster....247
Prayer....252
Compassion....253
Summary effect of the earthquake....255
Transformation through aspects of the UBTC environment....256
Mentoring....256
Personalising of teaching....260
Personalising the teacher....260
Students as persons....262
The influence of data gathering....264
Students' interviews....265
The weekly reflection sheet....266

Teaching Transformatively 269

Conclusion 272
Transformative learning 273
Theological education 275
Formation 275
Unifying Theology and Spirituality 279
Integrating a fragmented curriculum 280
Implications of Transformative learning in theological education 281
Theological educators 283
Further research 286
Final word 289

Appendices 291
Appendix 1 United Bible Training Centre 291
Appendix 2 Student Interview Schedule 293
Initial student interview 293
September (medial) interview with students (semi-structured) 297
October (Final) interview with students (semi-structured) 297
Appendix 3 Weekly student reflection sheet 298
Appendix 4 Students' Final reflection 299
Appendix 5: Staff Data Gathering Instruments 300
Initial (Jan) Interviews with Staff 300
End of first month staff focus group 300
Fortnightly Staff Reporting: 300
September Staff Interview Schedule – Individual and Focus Group 301

List of References 302

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,

[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.

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,*

> *discriminating, and integrative understanding of one's experience. Learning includes acting on these insights.*[3]

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.[4] 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.[5] 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.[6]

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[3] Jack Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning," in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning.*, ed. Jack Mezirow and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1990), xvi.

[4] D.G. Hart and R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Introduction," in *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. D.G. Hart and R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1996), 17.

[5] Kenneth O. Gangel and Christy Sullivan, "Evangelical Theology and Religious Education," in *Theologies of Religious Education*, ed. Randolph Crump Miller (Birmingham Ala: Religious Education Press, 1995), 59-82, Kevin E Lawson, "Marginalization and Renewal: Evangelical Christian Education in the Twentieth Century," *Religious Education* 98, no. 4 (2003): 438.

[6] Or conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and cruci-centrism David William Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-17.

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.