

Global Transformative Learning and Its Effects: An Interview with Debbie Kramlich

AUGUSTA DAVIS
University of Central Oklahoma

This interview was with Debbie Kramlich, a skilled education consultant, educator, and transformative learning/listening force. Kramlich is skilled in global educating and transformative learning practices, and has used these to her own, and others', advantage. She has applied these ideas and practices in all parts of her life, from personal to work-related.

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Augusta: *What is your professional and academic background?*

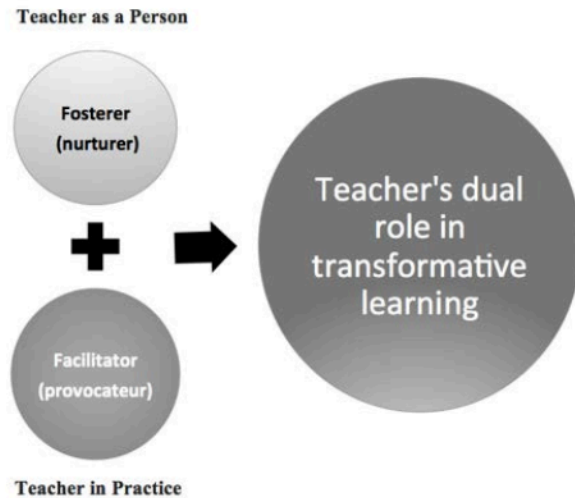
Debbie: Where I have lived has both shaped and limited my professional and academic background. I finished my BS in 1986 with a double major in Elementary Education and Biblical Studies. After a rough student teaching experience, I turned down an elementary full-time teaching position and was hired as all-school faculty for the role of Director of Academic Development from the university where I had just graduated. I served as a member of student support services for undergraduate students in all areas of academic support. I ran study groups for major exams, taught numerous seminars on study skills and writing papers, did individual tutoring, TA'd for professors who were gone and co-taught an Introduction to Communication class and a 000 English class while getting my MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Intercultural Studies. It was the best job I ever had, and I planned on starting with my PhD as soon as my MA was done.

During this time, I got married and my husband worked on his master's degree and in the library. After three years there, my husband and I were asked to move to Germany where he would be Dean of Students for an international theological school. I followed my husband overseas but was deeply sad to leave my position at the university as well as my dreams of doing a PhD I taught English at the school as well as at a language school close by. After four years there, we moved to Sweden for 12 years where he was the Principal of another theological school. We moved there with a small baby, and I focused on language learning and connecting with the community through a sewing club and other activities. During this time, I also did some work grading English MA theses for a university in Germany. During a visit to this university in 2007, while I was nursing my 6-week-old baby in their cafeteria, one of the administrators asked me to consider applying for their PhD program in Educational Leadership. Seeing that I had six kids at the time, I was stunned by the invitation but applied to the school as well as for a grant from Sweden and got both! I started my PhD in 2008 and one year later, our family moved to Germany. Due to our large family and numerous medical issues with our children, it took me nine years to finish, but I was thrilled to finally graduate in 2017. Our family had moved on to Thailand in 2015, but I was able to fly back and participate in my graduation. I am currently doing a visiting postdoc research associate position at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand and I am also teaching part-time at a local German school where three of my children attend (to help cover their tuition). I also teach block MA or EdD level classes as I have time.

Augusta: *How do you define transformative learning?*

Debbie: For the student: Encountering new thinking or ideas that are initially disconcerting or disturbing, but require critical reflection for meaning-making that result in changed thinking patterns for the betterment of the person and society.

From my dissertation: I focused on the role of the teacher in transformative learning. I proposed the following:



Foster: "To promote the growth or development of someone; provide the care that a parent provides" (2003). The word "foster" has been used by several key writers regarding the role of the teacher in transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2006; Newman, 2012).

Facilitate: Mezirow has used the word "facilitator" or "provocateur" to refer to the role of the teacher in encouraging the student to go through the transformative process by challenging existing thinking patterns, taking responsibility for learning and teaching critical thinking (Mezirow, 1997).

The teacher's role in transformative learning is to be both nurturer and provocateur in the classroom to provide a safe community and setting in which to challenge the students' way of thinking. This can take place through different instructional strategies.

Augusta: *How has your background shaped this definition?*

Debbie: I first stumbled across this theory when I was doing research for my PhD in educational leadership. I resonated deeply with the story of Edee Mezirow returning to school in her 40's (like myself) and this experience transforming her. It was this story that piqued Jack Mezirow's curiosity and led to the development of the transformative learning theory. What I found in transformative learning was a framework that met what I had been missing in much of Higher Education as it addressed both the person and practice of the teacher while focusing on holistic learning. Being a mother and doing a PhD kept me grounded in praxis and the application of this theory. I currently teach first graders through doctoral students which help to keep me rooted in reality and critical needs of today's children. I am a much better teacher of teachers by still remaining in the classroom and experiencing the good, the bad, and the beautiful chaos of elementary school. In addition, I am also both passionate and curious about national school systems and why they teach the way they do. My own children have attended both Swedish and German schools and there is a lot to be learned by seeing and experiencing how education works in multiple cultures. Sweden taught me to be particularly attentive to my student's mental health as well as cooperative and collaborative work. In German school, I appreciate the emphasis on class participation (up to 50% of one's grade is based on this) as well as critical thinking. I dream

about a collaborative conference where each country would have the opportunity to share their educational strengths.

Augusta: *How did you begin using transformative learning theory and/or practice?*

Debbie: There are a few specific ways that I have incorporated transformative learning in my elementary classes. I teach English to a diverse cultural group of students. In order to value the background of each student and the languages they speak, I support "translanguaging" in the classroom to allow students to speak their mother tongue and we do multiple activities where we are translating between multiple languages. For me, showing value to each student means to value both their individual and cultural backgrounds and, as a teacher, to invite the students to teach me things I do not know. I speak German well but still make occasional mistakes and allow the students to correct me. In turn, this lessens the student's fear of making mistakes and contributes to a warm community where they feel freer to speak. Last year, we did a project in class where we focused on learning about Thailand. (I teach at a German school in Thailand, but the curriculum is for the German context). I reached out to the Thai students at the German school and asked them to be the experts and teach us more about their country. They covered topics such as Buddhism, the mythology of Thai islands, Thai classical music, and problems that tourism is causing Thailand. Another positive experience has been to co-teach fourth grade English with the fifth-grade teacher for the last two years. Since our classes are small but the language abilities are very wide, we have more options for group work to be supportive and collaborative. I really enjoy and appreciate co-teaching with someone.

I recently taught an MA course on Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution. I started the course with self-reflection exercises to assist the students in seeing where both their personality and cultural framework could impact the material we would be studying in class. In addition, each student brought a specific case study to the class that we used to discuss disruptive incidents and see what the appropriate cultural response was and what it could or should have been. I had four nationalities and several cultural groups in the class. I was also very aware that I am a Westerner teaching in a predominately Asian setting and regularly welcomed input and critique from the class to help contextualize the material. Lastly, I found out that the Dean had recently been involved in a fairly public conflict resolution and invited him to share with the class about this situation. Since he was from the country in which I was teaching, he was able to address issues and understand the context in a way that I could not. Maintaining the posture and interest of a life-long learner is a high value for me as a teacher or lecturer.

Augusta: *What experiences have you had with transformative learning, if any, other than in your own practice?*

Debbie: I did not have any direct connection with transformative learning until after I finished my PhD. My first contact was the International Transformative Learning Committee (explained more in next question below). A meaningful experience for me was to attend an early researchers spring school sponsored by ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) in Italy in 2019. This theme was *Learning and social justice: Dilemmas of complexity in researching contemporary adult education*. It was an opportunity to meet with both early and experienced researchers, hear and share current papers and interests, and get direct feedback from one another. The format was welcoming and inclusive and exemplified the community necessary for transformative learning.

Augusta: *What is the most practical advice you would give educators who desire to join your program of research?*

Debbie: In short: My current area of research is more interdisciplinary as I am drawing on my MA in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and intercultural studies, my PhD in Educational Leadership as well as living and parenting as a migrant in both Europe and Thailand

for over 26 years. I am applying intercultural and psychological studies to the field of education to see how pedagogy needs to shift to accommodate the marginalized students in the classroom in light of globalization.

I think the best advice that I can give is to “connect”. I was very isolated while writing my dissertation for a European context while living in Thailand. I found out about the Transformative Learning Association online and joined. A year later, a call was sent out for volunteers to help plan the biannual International Conference at Columbia University in New York in 2018 and I signed up for two committees—the International Committee and the International Day of Listening Committee. Through these two committees, I found friends and also got involved in multiple collaborative projects. I am still doing research with the Listening Committee (now the Transformative Listening Project—Ed Cunliff is on this project with me). Connecting through volunteering, collaborating, and attending conferences is a great way to increase your knowledge, expand your research and find partners for collaboration.

Augusta: *Outside of academia, how do you believe organizations and professionals should practice Transformative Learning? What’s the value or benefit to them for doing so?*

Debbie: One area in which I am trying to bring in principles of transformative learning is with the NGO community in Thailand. There are a plethora of missions and humanitarian organizations here. I consult with an organization called Freedom Resource International (FRI) that seeks to bring awareness of the harm that often happens when trafficking work is not done well (often out of ignorance). This organization does not work directly with trafficked peoples, but rather has sought to be an umbrella organization to bring together the 70 plus organizations and individuals working to fight trafficking in Thailand. The co-director of FRI offered seminars on specific topics within trafficking to bring members of all organizations together. Rather than directly address the harm that was happening, a goal in the seminars was to provide space for dialogue and reflection where organizations could learn from each other and hear both positives and negatives about what was or was not working.

Leading people into transformation and change through reflection and dialogue is a transformative learning practice that helped to shape these seminars. It may have been more practical to have a frontal lecture on the practices that cause harm but a collaborative organized dialogue around struggles NGOs face was a start of relationship building so that this anti-trafficking work would not continue in independent silos but rather be supported through collaboration. The benefit of using transformative learning for organizations is that the organization is creating ownership of addressing problems at the basic level, some contribution from all participants is welcomed, answers come as a result of reflection and dialogue, and collaboration emerges to address the issues.

Augusta: *What does the future hold for transformative learning?*

Debbie: Transformative learning continues to generate interest beyond the educational realm into areas of business, medicine, and even language learning, to name a few. I just finished writing a chapter on “The Language Classroom as Transformative Response to the Unique Needs of Migrants and Refugees” for *Transformative Language Learning and Teaching* by Betty Lou Leaver, Dan E. Davidson & Christine Campbell, editors forthcoming 2020 by Cambridge University Press. Transformative learning offers a useful theoretical framework to support holistic teaching and learning. I also think that its attention to the affective domain aids in multidimensional teaching which is also important for current educational trends of social-emotional learning (SEL) as well as trauma-informed teaching. According to research, using SEL will assist students emotionally through improved social behaviors (including sharing, empathy, and kindness), improved students’ attitudes regarding school while reducing anxiety and depression while also improving academics by 11% on average (Durlak et al., 2011).

Augusta: *Is there anything else you would like to share and/or add?*

Debbie: It is important to never forget that transformative learning has the capacity to be used for harm. The quantifier that transformative learning should be used “for good” (for the benefit of humanity) is a critical one to hold in place. Research regarding the negative uses of transformative learning could also be important to serve as a warning of its potential negative consequences. I think it is important to consider the question, to what end is *transformation* being sought and is it of benefit to both the individual and society? Who decides if it is beneficial?

Augusta: *These are all the questions I have. I have appreciated this so much. Your experiences are truly amazing, and thank you so much for sharing them with me.*

Author's Note: Augusta Davis is a JoTL editorial research assistant who recently graduated with her BA in English. She is now working as a writing consultant at Tulsa Community College.

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