

**Troublesome Transformation: One for One or One for All?
Moving from the Individual to Considering the Collective
in Qualifying Good Transformation**

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ABSTRACT

Transformative Learning theory has been criticized for its lack of clarity regarding both the type and objects of transformation. The paper draws inspiration from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the Blackfoot Indians to propose two practices to qualify transformative learning practices, helping to ensure cultural perpetuity and that no harm is done. The first practice includes adopting the mindset of cultural humility as a lifelong learning posture toward other cultures. The other practice is one of beneficence, which encompasses acting with charity, mercy, and kindness toward others. Both practices need to be mindful of the dominant cultures and the power they have, making sure to not only give space and place to non-dominant cultures but to also practice agentic engagement where all have full voice and agency when interacting with each other. These two practices can help to guide transformative learning to a positive outcome that benefits both the individual and society.

Key Words: Transformative Learning Theory, Cultural Humility, Beneficence, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Blackfoot Indians.

Introduction:

The theme of the inaugural July 2023 TEAE Conference was *Reimagining transformative and emancipatory adult education for a world to come*. This conference drew over one hundred scholars and practitioners who exchanged innovative strategies to elevate and reframe adult education for the future through the lens of transformative learning. However, just three months later, the future is not looking bright with escalated geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East, the ongoing Russian-Ukraine war, and Australia's decision against constitutional recognition of its Indigenous population.

Notwithstanding advancements in education, the widespread availability of information and knowledge today, and the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence, it seems as if society is less willing to dialogue or seek common ground. Instances of prejudice and hate crimes are on the rise. Many seem entrenched in their opinions, unwilling to engage in self-reflection or seek any sort of transformation. Transformative learning, a process where individuals critically examine their deeply held beliefs and values and undergo significant shifts in their perspective, can act as a potent change agent in numerous settings, but it seems as if these spaces for transformation are decreasing. What is still possible today? To address this

query, it is first necessary to consider some gaps in transformative learning.

Troublesome Transformation:

Despite its popularity and application to multiple disciplines and fields, Transformative learning theory (TL) has received multiple critiques since its inception (Newman, 2012). One critique postulates that *transformation* has not been qualified in terms of positive outcomes, partially because people understand and interpret transformation differently (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Tisdell, 2013). Additionally, Keegan (2008) suggests that transformation is so broadly defined, it could be trivialized to denote any minor change, or conversely, be elevated to signify a profound paradigm shift. Further clarification regarding the nature and outcomes of the transformation as posited by TL is necessary.

Although there has always been an underlying assumption that the transformation is for the better, transformative learning can also be harnessed for detrimental outcomes. Taylor and Cranton (2013) criticized the fact that the premise of transformative learning resulting in 'positive' transformation has not been thoroughly discussed or analysed. Another reason for the lack of clarity around "transformation" is its prolific application across diverse contexts. This confusion has allowed for a fluid, context-driven interpretation, rather than adhering to a standardized definition, thereby diluting its core and potential clarity.

Outcomes of Transformative Learning:

Mezirow has faced criticism for the theory's individualist perspective that seemed to focus on individual transformation overshadowing

societal change (Sorensen, 2007). Yet, a closer examination reveals that critical social theory was considered in Mezirow's theory (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). This paper considers this dilemma by posing several questions to consider in the teaching and implementing transformative learning principles. While there are no specific clear answers, numerous practices are proposed that can guide transformative learning practices to be of benefit to both the individual and to society.

Object(s) of Transformative Learning:

Here are many questions to be considered when determining both the nature and the objects of transformative learning.

- What needs to be re-considered within TL theory to ensure that transformation is for good?
- Who determines (or who has been determining until now) whether transformation is a positive one?
- Should the collective always be considered, even in individual transformation? How?

The illustration below depicts the ideal centre of transformation that is benefits all. To explore ways to move toward this centre, inspiration is taken from a re-imagining of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

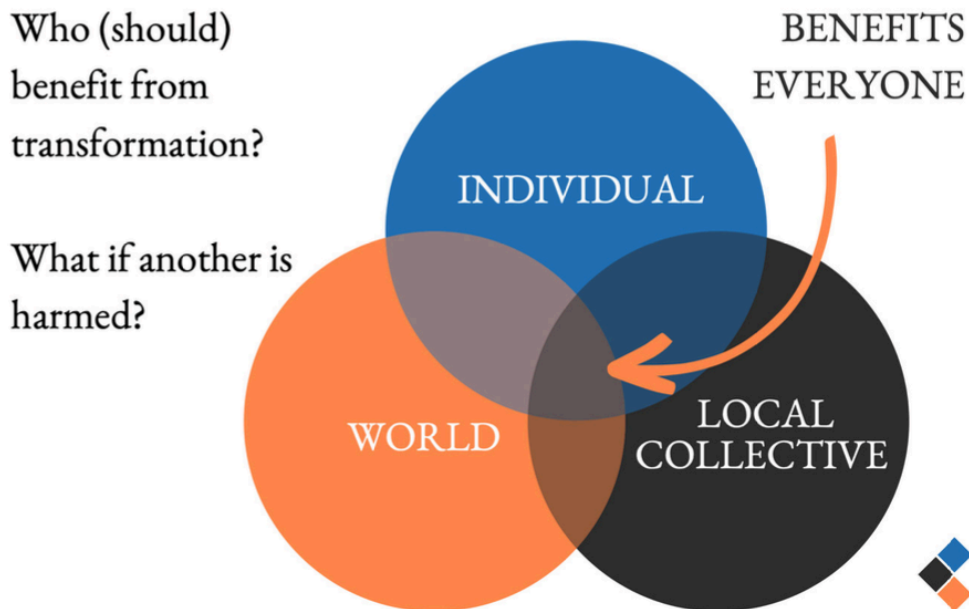


Figure 1 Object(s) of Transformative Learning

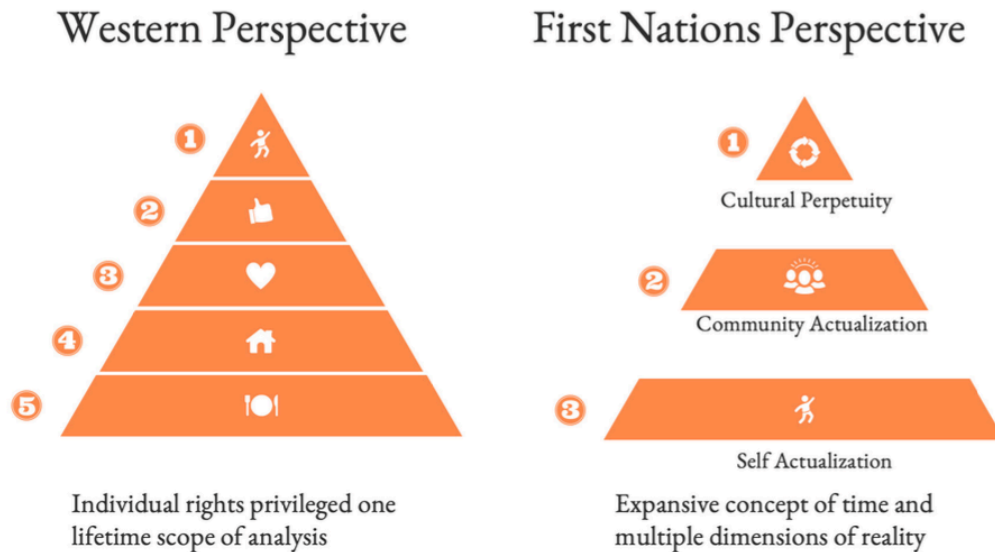
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

According to Blood and Heavy Head's lectures (2007), Maslow visited Siksika when he was 30 years old, along with Lucien Hanks and Jane Richardson Hanks. He wanted to see if his hypothesis related to social hierarchies was a universal one or not.

However, he was quite surprised by the Blackfoot community as he did not find them driven by power, but rather by working together and supporting each other. This led to most of the people having enough to eat, having a system of law and justice that was fair, while also being content with their lives. Maslow noticed that around "80–90% of the Blackfoot tribe had a quality of self-esteem that was only found in 5–10% of his own population" (video 7 out of 15, minutes 13:45–14:15). In fact, he felt that many of the Blackfoot community had already self-actualized. The Blackfoot soci-

ety placed cultural perpetuity at the peak of its societal needs and goals. Cultural perpetuity is an understanding that even though an individual will be forgotten, each person has a part to play in ensuring that their culture's important teachings live on.

First Nations look at everything they do within the timeframe of seven generations. This means that one's actions are informed by the experience of the past seven generations and by considering the consequences for the seven generations to follow (Blackstock, 2019). Rather than the individual becoming the centre and priority, instead the focus was the longevity of the culture (Ravilochan, 2021). What can transformative learning take from the Blackfoot community's cultural perpetuity to inform and give contours to 'transformation'? Two practices are proposed below: cultural humility and beneficence.



Concepts and graphs from Maslow's hierarchy connected to Blackfoot beliefs by Karen Lincoln Michel

Figure 2 Western Perspective vs. First Nations Perspective (Michel, 2014)

An often-overlooked fact is that although Maslow was interested in hierarchies of societies, the triangle image did not originate with him, instead it was a visual shortcut created by Douglas McGregor, Keith Davis, and Charles McDermid in the 1950s (Bridgman, 2019).

Cultural Humility

In considering cultures and communities, a practice from the medical field offers a way for different cultures to engage with each other respectfully. This practice toward originated among medical workers and how they interacted with indigenous peoples. It was first proposed as the “ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [per-

son]” (Hook et al., 2013, p. 2). Doctors and other medical professionals were encouraged to adopt this life-long posture to grow in trust with their patients. Cultural humility has been suggested as a preferable alternative to cultural competency. Often, a competency is a skill that can be learned and completed. The word itself can become a barrier to staying in the posture of a learner, which is essential when it involves relating and engaging other cultures. It is not possible to fully understand or appreciate another culture and therefore, cultural humility offers a mindset approach to ensure that cultural engagement is offered from the posture of a learner with curiosity and without judgement. This attitude is critical in giving marginalized cultures agency and value and essential in the medical field where the doctor-patient relationship has tremendous impact on positive outcomes.

For transformative learning practices, cultural humility offers an approach that reduces power between dominant and non-dominant cultures. It provides each party with their own voice and the right to their own story. If practised with genuine interest and care, it can be a bridge builder and provide the context for transformation that would impact both groups. In one way, this relationship becomes Freirean where the teacher and student both become the learner and teacher of each other. Practising cultural humility offers a guide to practice perspective-taking for new meaning schemes to develop as one learns from the other and their cultural background and story.

Challenges of Cultural Humility

Despite the potential of cultural humility, it has several challenges to consider. First, the group holding the power and privilege needs to be aware of the power differential, and how this can impact relationships. Cultural humility should not be forced on a non-dominant culture and used by the dominant culture to oppress or exploit the weaker one. This can be a challenging scenario to navigate as it requires self-awareness from both parties.

Cultural humility also asks for the individual to consider their privilege and biases and lay those aside, and to trust the other with their story. It chooses not to impose its own prejudices or judgements on the other, but instead holds a judgment-free space for the other. One possible dilemma to consider is that a dominant culture may not be willing or interested in practising and adopting this posture of cultural humility. Without self-awareness or a willingness to lay aside one's power to engage the other on an equal setting, relationships between parties unequally balanced with power will be challenging.

Cultural humility is generally viewed positively because it encourages openness, ongoing learning, and respectful engagement with

other cultures. However, certain challenges or negative aspects can arise in discussions or practical applications of cultural humility, especially in the context of broader socio-cultural dynamics. Here are a few considerations:

- Cultural humility emphasizes recognizing one's limitations in understanding other cultures, but if this focus is too encompassing, it can impede confident decision-making or action. It might lead to situations where individuals are so cautious that they become ineffective or overly reliant on others to navigate cultural matters.
- Cultural humility can sometimes focus too narrowly on individual attitudes and behaviours, potentially neglecting the broader systemic inequalities that contribute to cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. Without a concerted effort to address these larger issues, cultural humility alone may not lead to substantial change in institutional biases or structural inequalities.
- If practised properly, attempts at cultural humility could inadvertently reinforce cultural stereotypes. For instance, professionals might prepare for interactions with individuals from different cultures by learning about those cultures in a way that relies on or reinforces stereotypes, rather than approaching each person as an individual with unique experiences.

The world today and distinct culture groups has shifted significantly due to globalization and news and media access. Rather than a multicultural world, the world today

could be characterized as transcultural, where cultures are merging and converging. Individuals and groups come into contact and interact with a variety of cultures, often leading to the blending of different experiences, beliefs, traditions, and practices. This concept recognizes the complexities of cultural transformation and suggests that cultures can no longer be seen as distinct entities but are instead interconnected, influencing one another in dynamic ways. In essence, transculturalism involves a delicate power balance, often reflecting broader geopolitical and social power structures. While there's interaction and blending, there's also competition and struggle in maintaining cultural identity and influence. Cultural humility can also support this transcultural world by advocating for openness and respect for other cultures, by reducing power imbalances and by maintain the posture of a life-long learner who is seeking understanding and adapting and reflecting on what they are learning. When individuals approach cultural exchanges with the humility and respect advocated by cultural humility, transcultural interactions are more likely to be equitable, respectful, and enriching for all parties involved. Another criterion is also important to consider keeping these interactions as well as possible transformation a positive one.

Beneficence

Beneficence is "defined as an act of charity, mercy, and kindness with a strong connotation of doing good to others, including moral obligation" (Kinsinger, 2009, pp. 44-46). It refers to an ethical standard that goes beyond "do no harm" and requires that the objective of any study be for the welfare and/or benefit of all participants (Beneficence (Ethics), 2021). As transformation occurs in individuals, it should not actively harm or hurt either the individual,

someone else, or a society at large. This practice is an imperative while engaging in any human subject research or in the medical field, and should also be a criterion in education. How can transformative learning practices ensure that no harm is done?

In essence, combining beneficence and cultural humility leads to more ethically sound, respectful, and effective care or service. The approach ensures that professionals don't just seek to do good based on their own cultural assumptions but understand the diverse cultural implications of their actions, thereby truly serving the best interests of those they are helping. By considering beneficence, they also look beyond the classroom and individual student, and consider the larger context and implications of what is being taught.

Challenges of Beneficence

What if the practice of cultural humility allows for diverse groups or religions the right to practice beliefs that are harmful to members of the group or to others? Who decides what is harmful or not? Can cultural humility be practised in a way that also does not allow all cultures and faiths to do as they think best?

Even today, these dilemmas are emerging in the news cycle. Is one nation allowed to defend horrific acts of terror with equally horrific acts of terror? Is one religion or faith allowed to mutilate some of its members? Who or whom should never be harmed? While the United Nations has worked and is working on basic human rights, the challenge is to motivate everyone to self-reflect, to grow in self-awareness, and to do no harm. These words are easily written, and yet seem to be practised less frequently today. Has self-actualization encouraged people to create echo chambers where they only must engage with like-minded people?

In addition, far too often, non-dominant cultures feel that if dominant cultures hear

their stories, they will be eager to embrace change and transformation. Yet, far too frequently, dominant cultures are not eager to listen, to release power, or to give agency and voice to the non-dominant culture (Cooley, 2014). What can be done to give power to the non-dominant culture? What measures can work to “start” or “nudge” dominant cultures toward societal transformation?

Conclusion

Transformation is a troublesome term to define, even within the context of transformative learning theory. What is its object, and what should the outcomes be for it to be considered transformation? Adopting cultural humility as a mindset, forces one to be self-reflective and grow in self-awareness, realizing that all cultures are unique and valuable. Beneficence encourages one to consider practices that are harmful beyond the individual but also for the community or the world at large. These two qualifiers can add additional clarity and contours to the tricky part of transformation. Maslow also acknowledged that value of community actualization and cultural perpetuity.

Scott Barry Kaufman (2020) found an unpublished paper from Maslow 23 years after he first published his paper on the Hierarchy of Needs. This paper is called, “Critique of Self-Actualization Theory”. Maslow quotes,

“... self-actualization is not enough. Personal salvation and what is good for the other person alone cannot be really understood in isolation. The good of other people must be invoked as well as the good for oneself. It is quite clear that purely interpsychic, individualist psychology without

reference to other people and social conditions is not adequate.”

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