Mezirow, Jack, Edward W. Taylor, et al. *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*. **San Francisco: Jossey-Bass-Wiley, 2009.**

Reviewed by Déirdre Carney

 Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education, edited by Jack Mezirow and Edward W. Taylor, succeeds in its stated aim to "provide practical and concrete instructional guidance to interested practitioners" (xiii). The first of the book's five sections offers a thorough "overview" of the theory undergirding transformative learning (1). Anchored, then, in this theoretical context, sections two, three, and four present applications of transformative learning in the classroom, community, and workplace, in the United States and internationally, in such diverse areas as faculty development, palliative care, mentoring, and leadership development. These varied settings for transformative learning are described by the practitioners in first-person essays that include detailed explanations of the project and its outcomes, supporting research, and a closing reflection. While all of the essays are refreshingly honest, the reflections in particular are frank in addressing the questions and problems that can arise in the process of transformative learning. Of course, some essays are more successful (and slightly more engaging) than others in demonstrating the implementation, successes, and pitfalls of transformative learning. But together they create a complete picture. Section five concludes the text with a reflection and summative remarks on the "vast array of purposes and settings in which transformative learning is being practiced" (275). For both the experienced facilitator and the educator new to transformative learning, the book is a useful reference for either retooling an established program or starting to plan a transformative learning experience.

Transformative learning, "the dominant teaching paradigm discussed within the field of adult education," is explained as "an approach to teaching based on promoting change, where educators challenge learners to critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them" (xi). Methods applied in transformative learning include journaling, role play, storytelling, field visits, coaching, and discussion, all of which are familiar to traditional classroom teachers. If the methods are similar and classroom education is also meant to bring about change in students, what then is so different about transformative learning? The chapter "Mentoring: When Learners Make the Learning" begins by acknowledging this very question: "By definition, all learning means change. Someone learns, and something is different: a behavior, an attitude, a skill, a rule, a role, or even a way of looking at oneself and the world" (78). But in a nuanced contrast, transformative learning entails not so much "becoming something different, but . . . becoming what one is" (238). In their chapter on "Promoting Dialogic Teaching Among Higher Education Faculty in South Africa," Gravett and Petersen explain that an essential beginning step to the process "requires that learners come to awareness that there is indeed a need for transformation"(101)–and then employ some unfortunately named terminology. The term "learning edge," referring to students' being "on the edge of their comfort zones" as learners (107), may sound like irresponsible pedagogy. Indeed, the authors' reflection states that "if learners are pushed too far, they can become defensive, resist the new learning, and withdraw in order to keep safe." Thus facilitators "need to maintain a careful balance between challenge and comfort with learners" (107). However, facilitators are also "continually on [their] own learning edge" (108). That is, facilitators do not sit back and watch from afar as their students struggle through emotionally difficult transformative learning experiences. In fact, educator Elizabeth J. Tisdell writes, "I never ask students to do anything that I am unwilling to do myself" (93). One facilitator advises the neophyte

to "trust the process and relax into it, even though it may feel messy and emotional" (146).

In that vein, in addition to emphasizing planning and expecting the unexpected, the essays reinforce how emotional the transformative learning process can be for facilitator and student alike. One writer described "a predictable point . . . when one or more people will project their anxieties, confusion, or anger onto me" (Lange 202). Susan R. Meyer states candidly, "Some participants should have been screened out" (224). She continues: "focused journaling and exploration of life history cannot be confused with therapy" and emphasizes the importance of "hav[ing] systems in place to provide additional services" (225). However, these messy emotions should not be conflated with a lack of intellectual rigor because "a healthy interdependence between the affective and the rational . . . is essential for transformative learning" (252). Likewise, Mezirow's theory asserts that "critical reflection is integral to transformative learning" (125).

One troubling issue may remain for cautious readers, and this concerns whether a student necessarily comes away transformed and how exactly that is measured and evaluated. One essay grants that learning experiences can be "enlightening, educative, and empowering but not necessarily transformative" (253). If a student does undergo a transformation, does this imply his or her having merely subscribed to the facilitator's beliefs? For the two practitioners of adult basic education, "Evidence of transformative learning came in many forms" (174), which is a good reminder for readers that the essays are not rubrics, and students are not automatons. Alcántara, Hayes, and Yorks also state that because "transformative learning is emergent, not instrumentally produced" (258), outcomes vary. So while there are "core elements of fostering transformative learning" (4), which are described thoroughly in the first chapter on "Fostering Transformative Learning," students cannot be coerced into change. This uncertainty about outcomes reflects the "ultimate indeterminacy of educational work" (Lange 194), whether inside

or outside of the classroom. Still, while transformative learning is "left to the direction and will of the learner," it is still purposeful and structured (277).

The book would be incomplete if it did not share the voices of the students who have themselves experienced transformative learning. One essay reprinted excerpts, not just paraphrase or summary, of positive student feedback on their experiences (201). Perhaps a future edition could compile student voices speaking in their own essays, since their words help to illustrate the true nature of transformative learning. For example, one student writes, "Support of my colearners was very important, and I feel as if a new network/community of friends has been started. . . ." Another student comments that "[w]ithin three classes, you feel as if you are dealing with a friend and equal as opposed to a 'teacher.'"

While the writer-practitioners of course value and encourage transformative learning, they do so with appropriate cautions. In their chapter on "Transformative Palliative Care Education," for example, MacLeod and Egan admit that "some students felt that they were being manipulated into inappropriate forms of self analysis" (116). One essay described "initial student resistance to group activities" (51), and another that a professional development workshop for teachers "was not received enthusiastically at first; it was misunderstood and resisted" (178). However, in the best cases, transformative learning can "create spaces for rehearsal for action" and the "imagining of alternative realities" (44). The chapter by the European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness even offered descriptive "snapshots" from three different years to illustrate what transformative learning looks like over time (265-69). In various ways, each of the essays reveals that facilitators must be attentive to how they can "affect the group's experience" through their "assumptions, values, and actions" (257).

A consultant wrote of her candidate's habitual behavior that "it can get in her way" (156). Transformative learning asks students to get out of their own way; in a sense, they are, or can be, their

own barriers to learning and growing. We often hear of the need for a revolution in American education. As these powerful essays show, transformative learning may be one start.