

Lost in transformation: Mezirow, immigrants, and identity

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One can connect Mezirow's transformative learning theory to many contexts; critically questioning one's meaning perspectives is indeed a prerequisite for personal growth, not limited to the field of adult education. This paper applies the theory to the adaptation of immigrants, whose success will depend on their responses to the 'disorienting dilemma' caused by the new environment. It draws on written accounts by individuals in diverse fields, as well as the author's personal experiences as a Chinese-Canadian music educator who dealt with different educational principles in both countries. The jolt of immigration can be used to positively transform one's self-identity; a dual frame of reference can become an invaluable "cultural capital" (in Bourdieu's words). However, it is a difficult balancing act to be able to question one's cultural assumptions without undermining the foundations of one's psyche. Consequently, many immigrants resist the necessary transformations, undergoing psychological turmoil and social inadequacies. Some authors have shown limitations to Mezirow's original theory, such as the fact that transformation might occur in a more practical way and without deep critical thought, or the fact that the phases of a transformation do not necessarily follow Mezirow's order, or his neglect in discussing the relevance of the degree of readiness that people might have beforehand. This paper identifies yet another issue: by assigning the responsibility of transformational learning solely to the person's ability to confront his/her assumptions, one ignores the fact that society has a paramount role in en/discouraging change, something especially true in relation to immigrants' experiences.