**Jack Mezirow: Transformative Learning**

Jack Mezirow is an American professor of Adult Education. He views adult education as a powerful force to help adults realise their potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible, and autonomous. People may come to adult education to learn specific skills and to meet short-term goals, but the overall purpose of the educational experience is to develop autonomous thinking. Mezirow believes that this is an essential capacity for all adults living in a democratic society, especially in a time of rapid change.

For Mezirow, ‘autonomy’ refers to the understanding, skills, and dispositions that people need in order to become critically reflective of their own assumptions about how the world works. This means analysing our ‘frames of reference’. A frame of reference is a coherent body of experience, values, feelings and conditioned responses that determine how we each see our world. It is like a lens, through which we view the world and which in turn, shapes how we interpret it and how we act. We tend to dismiss anything that falls outside our frame of reference that does not fit our preconceptions.

‘Habits of mind’ can limit our thinking and our actions. These are habitual ways of thinking, seeing, feeling, acting and they are shaped by the underlying assumptions of our frame of reference. It is the job of adult education to help us to examine our frames of reference and habits of mind, open up to a wider perspective and to let go of those that limit our thoughts and actions. This is known as “transformation”.

Mezirow makes an important distinction between working towards short-term objectives, and long-term goals. The learner’s immediate focus may be on practical, short-term objectives, such as to pass their driving test, get a job or promotion, or help a child with homework. However, knowledge alone does not automatically result in autonomous thinking. Therefore, experiences which foster this important competence need to be built into the learning experience. “Fostering greater autonomy in thinking is both a goal and a method for adult educators.”

Discourse is an important tool which can foster autonomous thinking. It is a specialised type of dialogue which examines evidence and arguments for a point of view, and considers alternative perspectives. This view of education as transformation has many concrete implications for practice.

The role of the educator is that of a *facilitator* and *provocateur* rather than an authority on subject matter. This means encouraging respect and responsibility for helping each other learn; to welcome diversity; to foster peer collaboration; to provide equal opportunity for participation and generally facilitate communication.

For Mezirow, transformative learning is not an add-on; it is the essence of adult education.

Mezirow, Jack (1997) Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice

Mezirow, Jack (2000) “Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory,” in Mezirow, Jack et al. (2000) *Learning as Transformation. Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco), 3-33.