

# Transformative learning theory and coaching: Application in practice

Kristina Sammut, St. Francis Xavier University and Government of Ontario, Canada  
Contact Email: [kristina.sammut@ontario.ca](mailto:kristina.sammut@ontario.ca)

## Abstract

The aim of the research reported in this paper was to discover if and how transformative learning theory is applied in coaching. Data were collected from eight coaches through semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study revealed four emerging themes: space and context of the coaching environment; the coaching relationship; dialogue, language and communication; and transformation. The research also found robust links between the fields of coaching and adult learning theory, specifically, Mezirow's six core elements of transformation. The paper concludes that coaching can benefit from the application of transformative learning theory and that individuals can also learn more effectively through the coaching process. Implications are drawn for transformative learning in coaching.

**Key Words:** coaching, transformative learning theory, transformation, adult learning, critical reflection, change, and leadership.

## Introduction

Approaches and practices of both coaching and adult learning display similarities, especially with respect to the learning environment and process of learning. To facilitate the learning process, for example, whether in a learning situation or a coaching session, it is especially important to know who the adult learner is, how the social context shapes the learning the adults are engage in, why adults are engaged in these learning activities, how adults learn and how aging affects ability (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Cox (2006) built on Knowles (1980) theory of andragogy, proposing that the framework can include the practice of coaching, and suggested that all coaching intervention is encompassed within a broad, generic experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984) and the theory of adult learning. This is supported by a significant evidence-based body of knowledge (Du Toit & Sim, 2010). By emphasising the integration of learning, Cox (2013) further recognises the final step of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning process. In addition, Askew and Carnell (2011) conclude that reflective learning leads to perspective transformation and fills an important gap in coaching theory.

Of the learning theories that Cox (2006) mentions, transformative learning theory appears to come closest to the goals and processes of coaching. The theory emerged from the work of Jack Mezirow (1991, 2009) and describes the conditions and processes necessary for adults to make a significant knowledge transformation and paradigm shift. Six common themes are central to most transformative educational experiences: individual experience; critical reflection; dialogue; holistic orientation; awareness of context; authentic relationships (Taylor, 2009).

There has been little direct research to find the explicit links between coaching and transformative learning. The aim of the current research therefore is to explore how transformative learning theory may be applied in coaching. Following a short literature review an outline of the qualitative methodology is

given. The findings section then discusses the adult learning themes that emerged and makes links between coaching and Mezirow's theory of transformation.

The origins of coaching can be traced back to discourses of philosophy, education, psychology, sports coaching, and organisational development (Du Toit & Sim, 2010). The philosophical roots of coaching derive from human psychology, and as Stober (2006) suggested, many of the values and assumptions of coaching are underpinned by a humanistic perspective. Cox (2006, 2013) elaborated further that coaching is a facilitated, dialogic reflective learning process and its popularity has risen due to needs of individual nature to be overcome by complex societal situations.

Selman (1998) acknowledged that adult and lifelong learning has been taken up to a degree never before experienced, by those working in workforce development, citizenship, social development, organisational strategies and management training. However, little is known about the unique challenges that emerge in these contexts (Taylor, 2007), and even less has been studied about the links to coaching. The literature demonstrates that there is a gap in the research looking at the effects of adult learning theory on coaching, in terms of theories, practices and benefits. In this paper I propose that the rapidly growing field of coaching would be improved by the application of the historically rooted theories of adult education, especially transformative learning theory. This study examined whether these theories and practices have been (however indirectly) helpful to coaching practice and if they facilitate learning in adults.

## **Methodology**

The research was conducted using an interpretive philosophical foundation, and analysis. Reality is subjectively socially constructed based on context and through active participation in processes (Merriam, 2009). Research and theory are generated from the empirical data collected during the research period to explain human action in specific contexts; knowledge can also be derived from multiple perspectives.

The study participants comprised coaches who had provided coaching services for at least two years on an individual basis; practiced transformational coaching in any context (coaching executive, life, business); and had approximately 100 hours of coaching practice (a standard set by the International Coaching Federation for minimal certification). A purposive selection strategy was used and the coaches were found through a number of means. 35 potential participants were garnered from the groupings.

The invitations to participate outlined the purpose of the study and the role as a participant. Eight coaches were selected by a purposive selection strategy from a pool of 570 people. The study took place over six weeks. Participants received questions in advance and signed consent forms for privacy and data integrity.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews, observation and audio recording. Interviewing helped to me work with participants to understand the transformative learning dimensions of their practice. Several forms of triangulation were used to help ensure internal validity of the study. Strategies included: observation; semi-structured interviews and follow-up; audio recording, followed by written transcriptions and having participants verify their transcribed findings for accuracy; and my own experience.

The interview questions were designed to address aspects of the participants' understanding and knowledge of adult learning; transformative learning; if/how their coaching methodologies help facilitate learning, change and transformation; their experiences as a coachee and how their learning experiences

influence the coaching environment; coachee readiness; how they foster transformative change; how they engage coachees in difficult moments; how dialogue creates ease and flow in the coaching conversation; how they ensure coaching is free of coercion; if coaching facilitates more effective and efficient learning; and if coaching can help adults achieve transformation of perspective.

## Participants

All of the participants were female and their coaching specialties varied from business, leadership, and life coaching; many focused on leadership coaching. All of the coaches were founders of or are a partner in a coaching/consulting organization as shown in Table 1. Participants also all had formal coaching education from varying and multiple institutions and accrediting bodies. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities.

Pseudonym	Formal Experience	Coaching Speciality	Primary Work Context	Formal Coaching Education	Preferred Coaching Methodology
Mary	18 years	Leadership/ Life Coaching	Principal Coaching/Training Consulting Business	CTI, Adler, Coachville, The Coaching Group, WABC, IFC Conferences	Mixed Method
Valerie	5 years	HR Consulting and Coaching	Principal HR Consulting and Coaching Business	Adler School of Coaching, ICF Certified	Adler Methodology
Susan	14 years	Coaching in Organizations	President & Coaching Practice Leader	Coaching Training Institute, CTI, Corporate Coach U, PCC, ICF	GAP Model
Debra	21 years	Organizational/Executive Coaching	Founder of Consulting and Coaching Business, Professor	Gestalt Coaching, Fielding Evidenced-Based Graduate Coaching Program	Mixed Method (Unit of Work)
Joanne	12 years	Conscious Transformation Coaching	Principal, Coaching Business	Ericson College, ICF Certified	Creative conscience and transformation - mixed learning, pastoral and coaching models.
Delores	12 years	Leadership/ Life Coaching	Large Consulting Firm & Independent Coach	Adler School of Coaching, ICF Certified	Mixed Method
Katherine	18 years	OD Consulting, Leadership/Executive Coaching/Life Coaching	Own Coaching/Facilitation Consulting Business	Co-Active Coaching - (CTI), Neuroscience, Consciousness and Transformation Coaching, ICF Certified	CTI Framework
Lisa	4 Years	Business Coaching/Life Coaching	Partner in Training & Coaching Business	Board Certification Master Practitioner Training, NLP Coaching in timeline therapy and hypnosis	Timeline Therapy Intervention (NLP/timeline therapy techniques/ hypnosis)

**Table 1 – Participants**

Data were analysed through a six-step process (Lichtman, 2013). The six steps consisted of: initial coding; revisiting initial coding; developing an initial list of categories; modifying the initial list based on additional rereading; revisiting categories and subcategories; and moving from categories to concepts. The data were analysed through a process of reading and re-reading the data, transcribing and identifying major themes. Categories were then formed from the major themes identified.

Analysing transcripts, field notes, and my own research journal, I derived over 500 initial codes from the eight participants. Findings were analysed individually and collectively and in an iterative process. Major topics and categories were formed while others became subsets of these topics and placed

in a hierarchy. Redundancies were removed and critical elements were identified and ranked. I formed the final concepts through a horizontal analysis of the remaining categories.

## Findings

Participants were asked questions about their experiences with coaching both as coach and a coachee. Six of my 11 questions centered on the facilitation of transformative learning. I focused on several core areas of coaching that were most connected to transformative learning: experience; critical reflection; dialogue; and holistic experience. From the participant's responses, four themes were identified: space and context of the coaching environment; learning and the coaching relationship; dialogue, language and communication; and transformation. The first theme that emerged from the analysis was the overarching space and context of the coaching experience.

### 1. Space and Context of the Coaching Environment

All participants described the emotional environment similarly as a “safe” or “sacred place.” Participants collectively identified six common elements: a safe place; a sounding board; non-judgmental; no repercussion; the trusting relationship/given permission; active listening. Mary, a seasoned coach with over 18 years of experience, brought valuable insight to the coaching context, saying: “I probably know more about some individuals than their spouses do because the environment is created for them very safe. There is a trusting relationship that we have.” Joanne, an experienced coach, emphasised the importance and commitment to this space “it’s the idea that I create an environment, a safe place and I give people active listening more than anything...that’s really a space for people to find the answers in themselves.” Later Joanne brings more depth to her understanding of sacred “sacred, not in a religious sense...its unique, personal, its special, its non-judgmental, its open but contained and confidential, not to leave the room.”

A unique finding and perhaps an outlier to the study was in the data shared by Lisa, an NLP coach. NLP coaching is predicated upon coaching through the unconscious mind. Lisa had independent perspectives compared to other participants who work at the conscious level. In her NLP coaching practice Lisa describes ‘*holding space*’ as holding the emotional space for the client to succeed. She confirmed, “If we can’t see their [the client’s] success and believe in their success, the client will pick up through their sensory acuity.” Lisa was the only other coach to reference the ideal position of building inter-dependence in relationships. Participants referred to the space in the context both physically and non-physically. Joanne was very explicit in her understand and knowledge of space. “That it’s really more of a space for people to find the answers in themselves.” She expressed confidence and understanding of how the interpersonal space between the coach and client can impact the effectiveness of the dialogue. She shared “Because as soon as I start thinking about myself [while the client is talking] I admit I don’t listen...I’m not in the interpersonal space because that’s what the sacred space is – the space between two people.” Valerie also recognized both elements of the space in support of her own growth through awareness “it’s to give me the physical and mental space to explore, free of judgment, free of attachment to what option you choose to do, and what it means for me, not you interpreting what it means for me.” Valerie’s example gives credibility to the importance of both emotional and physical space.

The coaching context is also distinct in defining the physical space and parameters of the environment. Of critical importance to the physical environment is that priority is placed on setting time aside to schedule a mutually agreed upon time for the coaching session. In this example Valerie recalled what she provides for her clients and recognized the physical aspects of the environment:

In a physical aspect it is the time, dedicated time, one-on-one time in an environment that is conducive for quiet and conversation that allows coachees to feel important, that their issues are important, to feel a priority.

It could be concluded that there is a much deeper and authentic commitment to the space created and shared between the coach and client – revealing the dimensions of the coaching context. The coach is responsible for setting the context for the conversation.

## 2. Learning and the Coaching Relationship

The research data suggests that coaching is unique for its reversed role of power in the relationship when compared to traditional and non-traditional forms of learning, personal development and consulting. Power resides with the coachee and the coaching relationship, not with the coach. It is negotiated in the agreement. Thus, conflict is not a ‘bad’, limiting or demeaning word in coaching: in coaching, coachees often come to expose conflict, help someone through it, and dismantle it. The coaching relationship also offers both accountability and freedom.

The issue of safety also appears vital. Lisa identified: “It’s really important to me for the client to feel safe...the relationship needs to be free of fear”. Katherine, an organizational development consultant and co-active executive coach, also provided further description of the relationship:

It’s a design alliance, talking, setting up this thing that’s separate from you and me and it’s an entity – we both contribute to it ... you don’t get to be wrong, I don’t get to be wrong. It’s a flexible relationship, and non-judgmental; there is curiosity, openness – and a process to move into dialogue through this lens. This environment fosters trust.

Katherine also reflected on her own experience of being coached: she said that the experience had made her more accountable to herself than she used to be. This was important for Katherine who has a holistic approach to life and coaching.

Lisa recognized the importance of being present in the coaching experience when fostering transformation for her clients: “If we’ve got too much going on with ourselves, we’re not actually in a position to be coaching.” The concept of presence involves being aware of projection: “whatever is hidden in me will get mirrored out onto the person around me. The point is to make sure you’re absolutely present for the clients, and you are not putting words in their mouth, and that you’re not getting in the way.”

Participants also acknowledged the concept of the personal power of the coachees. Lisa explained:

If you think that the situation you’re in was created on the outside and it’s happening to you, and that *life* happens to you, then you don’t believe you’ve got the power to change it. So by taking accountability and realize[ing] that *you* happen to *life*, now you have acquired the personal power to make the change.

According to Lisa, frames are the learning that the client needs in order to proceed. Examples of frames include helping them understand the conscious and unconscious mind and how they work together; helping them understand personal power and cause and effect. Participants also identified authenticity as important in the relationship.

Authenticity is very important [to me]...I in turn would hope that my client will be authentic with me. If you're not authentic about a situation how can you modify it? ...I will always be totally honest with the client...I don't sugar coat, I say it like it is. I am a real straight shooter and have a tendency to attract more male clients than I do female, and I am not sure what that's about. (Mary)

A dominant finding was that in a coaching relationship clients are in charge of their own agenda-driven learning. Adults learn more effectively in coaching “because they create their own forward movement rather than someone imposing an activity on them, without their input (Mary).” Each participant had her own purpose, her own reason for being a coach. The purpose of coaching provides a framework for coaches from which they lead their practice. Understanding what meaning a coach brings to her purpose helped me as a researcher understand their philosophical views, and how they influenced and experienced the learning environment. All participants mentioned the idea of helping an individual learn and move through something. Each participant interprets the reason or rationale as to ‘*why?*’ from her own perspective. Whether that be an obstacle, as Lisa and Joanne suggested, or “blocks” according to Joanne. Katherine, Delores and Debra communicated their view of evolving for a greater purpose, to be, as Katherine puts it, “the best they can be in the world” or as Debra suggests: “a positive change and growth for the client”.

All coaches advocated customization of the coaching experience and putting the client first. Delores described her practice:

I let every coachee customize his[her] learning environment. I create an environment whereby they create their own learning environment so then they are on the driving seat of the coaching. [I ask] What is the goal and objective of the individual, what do they desire? What is the need? Where do they need to go? I do not use a one size fits all scenario at all. I customize for each individual's personal circumstances [...] coaching is about the individual.

Similarly, Mary confirmed: “It's about the person who's being coached” and Joanne explained: I always try to show them [my client] that it's a ‘*we*’ not ‘*you*’ or ‘*I*’, that I'm here to help them so it's a ‘*we*’ relationship.

A central concept that came through the interviews was that the coaches placed the needs of their clients ahead of their own. Trust is paramount in the coach-client relationship to foster learning and development. Trust is also earned. A candid example of a putting the client first is shared by Mary, who boldly demonstrated her unwavering advocacy for a coachee: “Please help me understand how it benefits you to bullshit me?” Comparably, Lisa, the NLP coach, said, “when people are feeling trusted, coaches can take chances and change requires risk”. The failures from taking risks are experiential learnings that the client can use for development, with the aid of the coach for support.

A critical challenge participants found in their coaching within organizations is the ongoing question of who the client is, especially when larger organizations are involved. How do coaches ensure the coaching experience is free of coercion? Sophie shares how she would handle this situation in a corporate coaching engagement:

to make sure it is free of coercion is to make sure the sponsor [organization] has to understand that the coachee has a choice in [choosing] the coach. If the sponsor provides the mandate for the coaching then the coachee has to subscribe to that and contractually agree ... so [the client] may know it might be career limiting if they say no. In that case through, through the coaching I

think the coach knows that [the client] is not developing trust, you're not developing rapport, your coaching is going nowhere."

When participants were asked about learning within the coaching environment, several collective findings emerged about the nature of learning:

#### *Learning takes place over time*

Delores has gained unique insight from her years of experience in change leadership, training, and human resources and explained: "In order for learning to really happen it was this idea that learning takes place over time and there is not really much a classroom can do. I find coaching an excellent sort of continuation of that for myself." She also believes that much learning occurs in the time between sessions: "It can often be the in the times between coaching sessions".

#### *Learning in coaching is a process*

Valerie expressed how coaching is a learning process: "Through this process they [clients] learn about themselves in terms of their self-work, their confidence level, what they want, relationships, and things like that". Debra also shared her perspective: "The process for the learning of the change is by supporting the client to discover for him or herself through inquiry". Delores shared, "I would say that every single client that I have ever coached has completed a learning journey through participating in coaching, and it's always 100 percent".

#### *Coachees discover learning for themselves*

Joanne's experience captures her coaching philosophy: "Me telling them is not as nearly effective as me showing them", while Mary explains how important holding on to her insight is for the client: "I could have told you that 20 minutes ago, but it would not have been as impactful for you as it was for you discovering it for yourself". Valerie was also able to highlight how learning is not always easy: "How do I choose to learn in a case when I'm feeling uncomfortable? When I become aware that I am feeling uncomfortable? What do I do to help my learning process?"

### **3. Dialogue: Language and Communication**

The significance of dialogue and language came to the forefront when undertaking the interviews. While I had referred to those obtaining services from coaches as "coachees", all participants referred to their coachees as "clients". There were also key words in the interviews that generated uncertainty in participants. Delores wanted to clarify and define the word *issue*. "I would never use the word 'issue' in a coaching framework", she said. Instead, she explained how she would reframe the question using *insight*: "I would ask ... how I help coachees [is to] teach them their insight." She needed to rephrase the question to work with clients at "a level of action, taking action...and doing some research on the level of self-discovery...it is here that you will probably get the deepest insight and most transformative change." Explicit definitions were also required with the words *transformation*, *change*, and *clarity*. Coaches used words based on the needs of their clients. For instance, after I used the word transformation to describe the growth and change of a client, Joanne replied, "I don't use the word transformation."

Language was also important at the point of entry. To gain trust with her clients Mary said, "I ensure I'm speaking to them in their language at their level." For example Mary said, "It took me five times, exactly the same question, phrased five different ways before the light bulb finally did go off." For Joanne, asking the question at the right time, in the right way is essential for critical reflection. "Sometimes the choice of a word would make a difference in how I looked at either the question itself or the answer." Language on questionnaires during the intake sessions also provided her with insights about

potential strengths and weaknesses of her client. Valerie said that her approach was more of a conversation than a lecture. She emphasised the importance of really getting to know her client quickly. “Language is really critical, especially in this kind global environment”.

It became very apparent in the interviews that not only were coaches aware of the language they were using, but also how it could impact their clients. Participants demonstrated caution and care in how they used language. They also used key words that were well received by the clients and asked thought-provoking and powerful questions. Most critically, they used language to challenge assumptions. Lisa uses frames to teach and guide clients. “When someone says something that is very limiting – I acknowledge they get to be right and then suggest that is not what they are talking about... I totally break down the language for them and help them build awareness about what it is they are saying and how much their language limits them.”

Body language was also key in helping coaches assess their coachees readiness for learning and transformation. Across the board, participants observed body language for openness and/or being closed. Mary would ask herself “Are they open or are they closed? Are they sitting there with their arms crossed like they don’t want to talk to me...or are they open? Are they relaxed? Are they all uptight?” She also assessed their tone of voice and level of eye contact. Katherine, who does her coaching over the phone said what was most important was “paying attention as a coach, really listening to what they are saying, how they are saying it. I may say to someone – tell me physically, what’s going on with you right now? Tell me how you’re sitting? Tell me what you’re feeling physically? Similarly Joanne, who is educated in theology and narrative medicine, acknowledged how complicated the listening field really is and how she has learned to listen to her clients. “There are lots of different cues from the tone of voice, the way silence is used, the way the pitch works, the velocity.” All participants observed body language for clues about openness. Mary would ask herself: “Are they open or are they closed? Are they sitting there with their arms crossed like they don’t want to talk to me...or are they open? Are they relaxed? Are they ‘all uptight’?” She also assessed tone of voice and level of eye contact.

Body language, like the dialogue itself, was key in helping coaches see and assess their coachees readiness for learning and transformation. Awareness of body language is critical especially, when verbal language is not always present or not a preferred method of communication.

#### **4. Transformation**

Participants had mixed and varying understandings of transformation and how it is experienced in their coaching practices. Definitions and interpretations ranged on a spectrum. For some it was non-linear and ongoing. For others it could be small or a large, expansive transformation and change - the ‘caterpillar to butterfly’ effect. Some examples include Valerie who said “I don’t think it’s linear, I think it can be circular...I don’t think transformation has a start and an end.” Katherine’s perspective confirmed its incremental nature: “transformation for me... sometimes it’s the ka-boom and sometimes its spelling just a little ‘eeke’ so, it can be incremental and it can be, wow, this will never be the same again”. Delores added, “transformation in itself may not be a realization of what they [the client] thought they were going to do in their coaching agenda but they have transformed from thinking or believing one thing to thinking and believing another thing”. Delores said, “I guess transformation seems to carry with it a focus of judgment about the journey that a coachee is taking”. She reiterated, “The client is in charge of their journey and if the client wants to make [a] transformational journey... then that is their choice and that is their story”. Debra reaffirmed, “I have no right, and it’s my philosophy that the purpose of a coach is not to go into impose transformation on a client.”

Participants found a difference between “clarity” and “transformation”. Two participants felt that while their clients experienced transformation during their coaching sessions, transparency or clarity is often the other outcome. Delores asked me as the researcher if I had assumed transformation was expected by the participants. I communicated that was not the intent of the question; rather I wanted to understand what she experiences as a coach. Delores then defined coaching as bringing clarity rather than transformation. Transformation for Delores is “caterpillar to butterfly” where clarity is “now I can see”. For Valerie, the individual change in coaching is transformational “the clients I’ve worked with, the coaching I’ve witnessed, and even the ones that I’ve gone through myself, are definitely extremely transformational.”

All participants were in agreement that a catalyst must exist in order to cause transformation. Again, there were varying views on how a catalyst was defined. For Valerie, a catalyst takes different forms and is an experience “It could be an experience that you’ve had let’s say a death, a birth, watching someone else go through an illness, just different things in life that impact people. It doesn’t have to be something as major as those things that I’ve discussed.” Mary, when describing her own experience being coached said, “to have this coach actually find that button within me and to have me pour out all kinds of stuff that I never actually, not even to my husband interestingly enough, had ever discussed with anybody else before it was like a cleansing I tell you. It was amazing.” Susan said that readiness and coaching ability make up a catalyst together.

I think it’s the perfect storm. Like a friend of ours describes it: all these opportunities are floating in the air around us all the time, and we may not see them because we are not ready to see them. And when we are ready to see them all of a sudden you know - *oh my-gosh, this came around just at the right time!*

Lisa, viewed the notion of a catalyst very differently from the other participants. She saw the client’s motivation as the vehicle: “The person [coachee] has to want it. They have to be open to it [the transformation].”

### ***Fostering Transformative Learning***

Participants were also asked about the ways in which they fostered transformative learning in their clients. There were several unique experiences. Working one to one through individual experience one of the main elements that was present was described by Valerie:

“It could be an experience that you’ve had let’s say a death, a birth, watching someone else go through an illness, just different things in life that impact people. It doesn’t have to be something as major as those things that I’ve discussed. It can even be something really small that can act as a catalyst to make a change or recognize that I’m not happy with something and I want to find out about that and see what I can do with it.

Elements of critical reflection and dialogue were also mentioned. Debra recalled a personal experience of critical reflection: “that question took me to that place inside of myself that really transformed my thinking and transformed my being and things became very clear for me...I felt at peace and very at ease with the decisions that I needed to make that I had been struggling with.” Katherine also focused on questions:

a powerful question takes someone deeper into their ... it takes someone below their rational self [and] there, it resonates to a powerful question. And in fact, the powerful question for you may not be the powerful question for someone else.

Delores uses the action reflection learning cycle 100 percent of the time...“you take action, you reflect on it, you decide what works, what doesn’t work, and you go back with a new strategy.” Susan shared her experiences, “Coaching is like stretching them - over achievement, so by posing requests...challenging their thinking, or challenging them to dig deeper into their gut or head or wherever they need to go for their own solutions or answers.” Mary confirmed a similar practice of challenging thinking: “ I say right now you have a series of beliefs [and] my question would be to you: are they your beliefs or are they beliefs that have been imposed upon you by someone else? And I am not expecting an answer today, but I just want you to start thinking about it.”

Katherine shared her perspective on integrating consciousness and intuition, as other ways of knowing, into her practice: “so it’s integrating, the rationale, the emotional, the spiritual, the physical and the consciousness...and bringing people to that in the coaching process because often, were so focused on the rationale, be scary.”

A few participants were able to provide stories and examples of complete transformation. One example comes from Joanne, who recalled a client of hers; a young girl who was depressed and had OCD. Even with medication from doctors there was very little change. Joanne worked with the girl for some time. She has now transformed: “Now I look at this girl who is so self-observant. She can recognize her own pitfalls. She knows when she is getting herself in a tight spot. She has developed mechanisms to be self-reliant in what she needs to do to help herself”.

Participants were asked several questions on how they foster transformative change. They were asked to think of some examples of strategies they use, how their client’s demonstrated transformative change, and if there were specific changes in behaviors they looked for and how they recognized them. Collectively, 10 strategies to foster transformation were directly mentioned by all participants: creating a safe environment; acceptance; presence; no-judgment; asking thought provoking questions/ deep inquiry for critical reflection; challenges false beliefs and assumption’s; accountability; active listening; modeling behavior. In addition, individual participants identified more than thirty other strategies: tools and techniques, mental models, frameworks that I have divided into three groups: The first grouping is individual strategies related to the coaching context/environment. In the second grouping I’ve identified strategies that more naturally would take place during the coaching conversation. The third grouping consists of independent, methodology-specific and unique strategies of preference certain participants. When asked how she fosters transformative change, Susan said, “by being supportive to a coachee, supportive, holding their vision when they can’t, challenging them, stretching them, but not forcing them”. She also gave examples of strategies used: “Challenging could be by direct inquiry, and to an open ended question, and allowing the coachee time to process and come up with their own perspective on that.”

### **Discussion of Mezirow’s Six Core Elements of Transformation in Coaching Practice**

When participants were asked about adult learning theory and practices, many had a good understanding that how adults learn differently from children. However, they were not familiar with or had received no training in transformative learning theories and practices. Participants are applying transformative learning theory and practices, but they don’t know or are only mildly aware they are doing so.

According to transformational learning theory, there are several necessary conditions and processes that can create a paradigm shift of perspective with adults. Three common themes were central to Mezirow’s original theory of transformation (1) experience, (2) critical reflection and, (3) rational

discourse in the process of meaning structure transformation (Mezirow, 1991). However, as transformative learning has evolved others have been added: (4) a holistic orientation, (5) awareness of context, and (6) an authentic practice have emerged as equally important (Taylor, 1998).

### ***1) Experience***

According to Mezirow, the learner's experience is the starting point and the subject matter in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). It is the experience itself, or disorientating dilemma as Mezirow suggests, that provides the grist for critical reflection. In order to move successfully through, learners must recognise the limitation of their perspectives.

Participants confirmed that coachees come to coaching for a host of reasons – being stuck in their lives with a problem or issue, a life changing event, professional development, etc. Coaching also begins with individual experience(s). All participants were in agreement that a catalyst must exist in order to produce transformation, regardless of its shape or form. In many instances the catalyst relates very closely to Mezirow's infamous disorientating dilemma. Similarly, the nature of the coaching is to set up to isolate a goal to reach and invite forward experiences. The coachees learn as they progressively work toward reaching their desired goal.

The study confirmed that all coaches use value-laden content such as homework, 'tasking', inquiry and reflection in dialogue in order to engage in the learning experience and promote critical reflection. According to the study, critical inquiry and follow-up to taskings and assignment occur as part of the coaching conversation and often provoke critical reflection.

### ***2) Critical Reflection***

Transformational learning is predicated upon critical reflection. According to Mezirow (2000), a distinctive characteristic of adult learners is to question the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience. When adults go through a disorienting event, they are more likely to revisit and revise their underlying assumptions and adopt a new paradigm and use this new paradigm to actively create new knowledge. This is often accompanied by conflicting thoughts, feelings and actions and can lead to a perspective transformation.

There are three forms of reflection: content (reflecting on what we perceive, think, feel and act); process (reflecting on how we perform the functions of perceiving); and, premise (an awareness of why we perceive). Research reveals that teaching aids such as writing in reflective journals have proven to strengthen the reflective experience by creating artifacts of the ideas and the mind, thus externalising an individual's reflective experience. Writing also helps address a limitation of making sense of reflection. Instructional aids are also used in coaching, however, they take the form of assessments, inquiries or strategies to help foster and facilitate learning and transformation. For example, as part of most intake/discovery sessions coachees are asked to complete written questionnaires and assessments to help coaches assess coachees' readiness for the coaching engagement. Participants confirmed use of these assessments are critical in determining if a coachee is ready, willing and able ready to participant in a coaching engagement.

Participants confirmed that critical reflection occurs throughout the coaching process, and is ongoing throughout the coaching sessions. Participants did not verbalise different levels of reflection as Mezirow does; however, there is evidence to suggest critical reflection has taken place at the content, process and premise level.

### 3) Dialogue

Rational discourse through dialogue is the essential medium through which transformation is promoted and developed (Taylor, 1998, 2007). Specifically, this occurs with the recognition that an individual's discontent and the process of transformation are shared with others and that others have negotiated a similar change. According to Carter (2002, p.82) this process is "highly personal and self-disclosing." Exposure to alternatives encourages the questioning of beliefs, and values, and when this leads to a shift in the way individuals view themselves, their perspectives or world views, they have engaged in transformative learning.

The study revealed that coaches refer to the dialogue that occurs in a coaching session as simply a typical coaching conversation. The findings suggest that through inquiry and reflection coaches were able to "plant seeds" that would grow over time. Homework and taskings provided them with the opportunity to engage with their peers, colleagues, and spouses. Participants noted in many of their experiences that coachees would often admit fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of change, pressure from loved ones and an overall vulnerability. Through dialogue and over time by having gained trust and rapport with their coach, limiting decisions and false beliefs and fear were identified; and new perspectives were attained. In instances where coachees were not ready, where they became more closed or shut down, coaches would spread out the coaching sessions, pause or place sessions on hold or simply end the coaching engagement with the interest of the coachee in mind. Participants also acknowledged the time between sessions was equally as important for reflection and coaches recognised that the conversation in coaching is not everyday conversation and it takes considerable strength, courage and vulnerability to participant and fully engage.

### 4) Holistic Orientation

Emphasis on a holistic orientation is critical when a less analytical perspective of dialogue occurs. Here, engagement with *others ways of knowing* – the affective and relational – are paramount. Historically, transformative learning has been criticised for much emphasis on rational discourse and critical reflection in the transformative learning process (Taylor, 1998, 2007). According to Brown (2006) learners rarely change through a rational process (analyse-think-change). They "are more likely to change in the see-feel-change sequence" (pg.732). According to Mezirow, to successfully engage in expressive ways of knowing educators have to create a learning environment conducive to whole person learning. Furthermore, expressive ways of knowing provide a means to evoke greater experiences for exploration, helping learners become aware of their feelings and their relationship to sense making, and contextualise them.

The agenda-driven learner centered approach of coaching allows the coachee to learn in their preferred way. In this sense the entire coaching environment is holistic, however, coaching style and coachee-coach will influence how holistic the environment is. Participants confirmed and verified through examples their alternative ways of listening through body language and voice tone, such as velocity and using themselves as an instrument to model learning and development. All of the coaches had a whole-person centered approach to learning therefore evoking the experience for exploration, creating and developing awareness and meaning making are all part of the process.

Participants were questioned about how they ensure the coaching engagement is free of coercion. They reiterated the critical importance of not influencing the environment and provided varying answers to ensure a holistic and authentic environment is created. Some coaches go out of their way to make sure there is zero co-dependency, while others question their own intentions when they themselves feel there

should be more movement. Almost all coaches discussed the importance of receiving ongoing coaching to make sure they are fully present during their coaching sessions for the client.

### ***5) Awareness of Context***

To develop awareness of context in fostering transformative learning is to develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of the personal and socio-cultural factors that play an influencing role in the process of transformative learning. External factors may include the conditions surrounding the immediate learning event, the personal and professional situation of the individual at the time and their prior experience, and the background or context shaping society.

Awareness of context was the hardest element to discern from the interviews. Participants acknowledged that most of their clients would have a different perspective, especially in experiencing transformation. Cultural awareness was raised as a concern from one participant and the need to include more diversity and less individual-centric coaching models and more family or community centered perspectives.

Research suggests fostering transformative learning in a traditional classroom setting is time-consuming, particularly when an effort is being made to provide access to all participants' voices (Taylor, 1998, 2007). The study confirms that learning and transformation do take place over time; however, this experiential learning is paid for by the coachee and therefore the time is accounted for and is a priority for the most part. Coaching engagements do not suffer from the same criticism of the traditional classroom as there is no specific ending to the coaching that cannot be adjusted. Coaching is not bound by the historical constraints experienced within in higher education settings.

### ***6) Authentic Relationships***

According to Cranton (2006), fostering transformative learning depends to largely on establishing meaningful and genuine relationships. Research suggests that by building trusting relationships learners develop the confidence to deal with learning on an affective level, where transformation can at times be perceived as threatening and an emotionally charged experience. Authentic relationships also allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly, and achieve mutual and consensual understanding.

Authentic relationships then are seen as the cornerstone of the context of the coaching environment. The safe and sacred environment provides a physical space and emotional environment in which the coachee can be heard. Since the coachee selects the coach and negotiates the coaching agreement, he/she also has the right to terminate the relationship at any point in time. The research study reaffirms how intimate and delicate the space is in which these transformative conversations occur. The role of the coach is to ask powerful questions, listen and empower an individual to elicit skills and creativity and this was supported by the research findings. Building rapport through matching body language and mirroring techniques with the client is also thought to be integral to the coaching relationship.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this research was to discover if and how transformative learning theory is applied in coaching. The research addressed whether coaches have knowledge of, and are aware of, transformative learning practices; actively make use of transformative learning theory and practices through their identified coaching model and their coaching practice; feel the application of transformative learning

practices can enable their coachees to learn more effectively and efficiently in their dyadic (one-to-one) coaching practice; experience and describe the effects of on transformative learning on coaching. The findings of the study revealed four emerging themes: space and context of the coaching environment; learning in the coaching relationship; dialogue, language and communication; and transformation. The research found robust links between the fields of coaching and adult learning theory, specifically, Mezirow's (2009) six core elements of transformation: individual experience; critical reflection; dialogue; holistic orientation; awareness of context; authentic relationships, all of which the study shows are actively used by coaches, even though they may not have been overtly aware that they were doing so.

As coaching continues to grow and standardize through accreditation, there may very well be a time when coaching will be acknowledged as adult education. In particular it may be that the rapidly growing field of coaching would be improved by the application of the historically rooted theories of adult education, especially transformative learning theory.

## References

- Askew, S., & Carnell, E. (2011). *Transformative coaching: A learning theory for practice*. London, England: Institute of Education, University of London.
- Carter, T.J. (2002). The importance of talk to midcareer women's development: A collaborative inquiry. *Business Communication*, 39, 55-91.
- Cox, E. (2006). An adult learning approach to coaching. In D. Stober & A. Grant (Eds.), *Evidence based coaching handbook* (pp.193-217). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Cox, E. (2013). *Coaching Understood: A pragmatic inquiry into the coaching process.*, London: UK: Sage Publications.
- Cranton, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cranton, P., & Carusetta, E. (2004). Perspectives on authenticity and teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly*, (55) 5-22.
- Du Toit, A., & Sim, S. (2010). *Rethinking coaching: Critical theory and the economic crisis*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Great Britain: Palgrave MacMillan
- Gray, D. E. (2006). Executive coaching: Towards a dynamic alliance of psychotherapy and transformative learning process. *Management Learning*, 34(4), 475-497.
- Knowles, M.S. (1980). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Cambridge Adult Education.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as a source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lichtman, M. (2013). Making meaning from your data. In *Qualitative research in education* (pp.241-268). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.
- Merriam, S.B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (coursesmart) (3rded.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). How critical reflection triggers transformative learning. In Mezirow, J., & Associates (Eds), *Learning as transformation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J., & Taylor, E. W. (2009). Fostering transformative learning. In J. Mezirow, E. W. Taylor, & Associates (Eds.), *Transformative learning in practice* (pp. 3-17). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Selman, G., Cooke, M., Selman, M., & Dampier, P. (1998). *The foundations of adult education in Canada* (2nd ed.). Toronto, Canada; Thompson Educational.
- Stober, D. (2006) Coaching from the humanistic perspective, In D. Stober & A. Grant (Eds.), *Evidence based coaching handbook* (pp. 17-50). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Taylor, E. W. (1998). *The theory and practice of transformative learning: A critical review*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education [Information Series No. 374].
- Taylor, E. W. (2007). An update of transformative learning theory: A critical review of the empirical research (1999-2005). *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26, 173-191.
- Taylor, E. W. (2009). Fostering transformative learning. In J. Mezirow, E. W. Taylor, & Associates (Eds.), *Transformative learning in practice* (pp. 3-17). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Kristina Sammut is an organizational consultant with the Ontario Ministry of Government Services. She has recently completed an Masters in Adult Education at St.Francis Xavier University.