Transformational Learning and Human Resource Development: Advances Toward a Knowledge Based Society through Humor

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A common thread within a growing globalism is the creation of an emerging knowledge-based workforce. This paper will discuss a message supported by adult education theory that is beginning to manifest itself in human resource development and the growing globalism that steeped in communication and information. Theoretical implications are reviewed that capitalize on transforming workers to learners whose world views are dramatically altered through the appropriate utility of humor that may lead to transformation.

Keywords: Human Resource Development, Transformational Learning, Humor

Much has been said about human resource development, the learning organization (Senge,1994) and organizational development. The ultimate goal of learning is change in knowledge, behavior, and ultimately world view. Expanding Senge's learning organization creates opportunities for a learning society. Therein lie implications for strong knowledge based societies that live, work, and learn in an engaging concentration and scope. However, individual learning is seminal to creating a knowledge based worker, organization, and society. Human resource developers must incorporate an overriding view that is infused with individual learner contexts and concepts of learning beyond job, career, and professional development. In order to achieve this evolutionary view, it is possible that enhancements to individual development would entail learning at a broader, deeper level. To instructively breathe transformative learning into human resource development, it could be that the learning itself must be transformational in capacity. Furthermore, human resource developers can foster learning that is both creatively expressed and can offer access to learners that matches their individualized, epistemological foundations. The creativity of HRD professionals must include a variety of potential learning strategies that facilitate change and prepare worker learners for insights beyond the job learning contexts, curriculums, and learned outcomes. The changes that may advance transformative learning involve HRD professionals at every level of societal transformation involves pragmatic methods of instruction. Yet, the utility of the methods can translate to transformation in the growing knowledge based organizations and societies around the world. The questions that surround the concepts and processes are as follows: How can meaning perspectives arise from a depth of learning that results in the knowledge of a new world view? How can HRD professionals begin to comprehend the diverse nature and culture bound understandings of cross cultural learning that will enhance learning, and develop the individual professionally? This paper explores aspects of humor, transformative learning, and human resource development within the context of adult learning theories. This investigation of humor theories links learning strategy and perspective transformation that is prevalent in adult learning literature. This discussion offers a literature review that investigates the theoretical insights of adult learning expert Jack Mezirow. Previews of how linkages between humor and perspective transformation can open new pathways to improve worker learner trust, esteem, communication, and altered world views are examined.

Adult Learning: Theoretical Perspectives

Lindeman (1961), Knowles (1980), and Mezirow (1990,2000), are considered forefathers in adult education. Foundational adult learning theories indicate adults undergo broadened orientations of their worldview from accumulated life experiences. Social and contextual references and experiences during adult life contribute to learning in an ongoing proliferation of knowing. A growing adult learning literature base stipulates that despite similarities in adult roles and responsibilities, the sum of each person's experiences makes for specific learned meanings created from their unique awareness. Even though the broadening and accumulation of meaning is qualitatively and quantitatively different from person to person and situation to situation, it is the individual's perspective that drives specific types of reflection and critical responses. Meaning making shapes the new learning that occurs from reflective processes. According to adult learning theorists, an ongoing learning process stimulates a conceptual worldview that accumulates experiences, precipitates meaning making, and creates the purpose for learning in other new encounters.

Perspective Transformation

A key adult learning theory developed in late 1978 by Jack Mezirow focused on adult perspectives. Mezirow (1990, 2000) states that adults' meaning making is situated in a specific cultural context. Within a specific cultural context, the meaning making of identity and beliefs, are habitually intertwined. New perspectives are transformed or altered by new learning. By converting various cultural and contextual points of view, adults develop changing values and increasing clarity. The results are reframed perspectives that are altered from those that were previously anchored in more stabilized frames of reference. Consequently, a new contextual understanding comes from bridging what is recently experienced to a developing, contour of fresh assumptions. Ultimately, the new learning leads to an alternative, broadened worldview known as learning transformation theory.

The Transformative Process & Critical Reflection

In his book *Learning as Transformation,* Mezirow (2000) notes that stipulations of transformation theory are that adults continually assess contextual understanding in their learning. Adults may critic and reflect on assumptions to validate personal meaning. The core learning result is that a point of view may be changed. The change may take place over a long period of time or in smaller incremental stages. Altered views entering established mental frames of reference formulate new phases of meaning.

Critical reflection challenges current assumptions, and contributes to broadened concepts and ideas. Perspective transformation refers to taking a problematic frame and transposes it into current adult meaning perspectives that generate different opinions and interpretations after critical reflection.

The progression of perspective transformation has been scrutinized among adult learning literature. Some critical perspectives of the theory are noted in research by Brookfield (1986), Gould (1978), Houle (1992), Taylor (1998), and others. Yet, Mezirow's the work stands alone as seminal work in adult education.

Learning that fosters transformed perspectives are most prominent when new ideas challenge hegemonic assumptions. It is a definitive aspect of transformative learning according to Brookfield (1986). Critical reflection that fosters becoming aware of power dynamics is a major component of the mindful, self-reflective process of transformation. Having a broadened reordering of how power is formulated and understood infuses critical assumptions with old mindsets. Critical assessments create the environment for establishing other different views. Taylor's (1998) discussion of transformative learning recognizes that a discontent in withholding old views, self-examination, and critical assessment can create a forceful shift in perspectives brought about by unresolved questions and concerns. As a result, there is a new social, contextual perseverance that accompanies relating old and early decisions. The knowledge-based society will require human resource developers to transform learning at work to examine critical assumptions that foster transformative learning. The links that build competence and self-confidence ultimately reintegrates into newly created mental frames of reference, and thus may create a new worldview and may make way for a knowledge-based society.

Humor Theories

The literature base and theories of combining humor and adult learning are not as prevalent as transformative learning and adult learning literature. However, the effects of humor are well documented. The foundational research regarding the physiological and psychological effects of laughter is most prevalent. Physiological and psychological advantageous effects of laughter and humor is more customarily written about and discussed among nursing and counseling professions. Volumes of literature on humor from theoretical composites are disconnected and lack unifying topics. The theoretical foundations of humor are recognized in several areas. Primary theory development has centered on three prominent assumptions.

The three leading theories surrounding humor are incongruity theory, relief theory and superiority theory. Research conducted by Berk (1998), Bryant, (1979), Endlich (1993), Fave (1996), Gruner (1967), Goodman (1983), Herbert (1991) and others target humor for communication enhancements and efficiency or inefficiency of humor on learning. (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977).

Incongruity humor theory indicates that humor is facilitated by unexpected, illogical, or surprisingly contrasting comments in cartoons, jokes or behaviors. Explanations of humor have evolved from contextual circumstances that indicate surprisingly abnormal outcomes that form absurdities are incongruous and humorous or funny. Social and cultural stipulations surround incongruity theory, and create a variable and unidentifiable theoretical base.

Relief theory primarily connects physiological and psychological releases. The physiological neural firing released by laughter impacts psychological outcomes and the effects are intimately linked to positive outcomes. The

recent proliferation of the healing effects of humor and laughter relies on the scientific research that indicates endorphin released during laughter or humorous encounters produces increased neural firing and stimulates the body's immune system. (Fry, 1992; Frances, 2001; Sultanoff, 1995).

Other initial psychological theories arose from Sigmund Freud. Freud (1960) theorized pent up sexual and aggressive impulses were more socially acceptable in expressions of humor and laughter. Release from anxiety, anger, and other tension producing feelings is the central focus of relief theory. More current research indicates the effects of humor in many cases includes reducing stress, building confidence and increased motivation from a psychological point of view (Endlich, 1993; Goodman 1992; Lefcourt, 2001, 1995, McGhee, 1983; Pease, 1991; Sherman, 1998; Smith, 1971; Struthers, 1993; Watson, 1988; Ziegler, 1998).

Superiority theory is the oldest humor theory, dating back to the height of the Greek and Roman eras. It is steeped in the premise that laughing and humor through disparagement, teasing, or ridicule provokes one person or group to feel superior to another. This theory is the oldest primary explanation for humor. The superiority theory supposes amusement heightens the self-esteem of those thought of as superior. Humor that negatively promotes one individual or group over another and precipitates negative, ego-inflationary results for the dominant group are inappropriate. At the same time, it supposes that amusement and humor diminishes the self-esteem of the less dominant individual or group. It is presumed that humor is perpetuated through laughter, and so is the hegemonic view of the superior group. The viability of anti-social or inappropriate humor can confirm superiority and foster aggression at the expense of others. The results can at the least widen gaps that discourage acceptance of cultural differences and negate cultural inclusion. The worst use of superiority humor can perpetuate oppression of minority groups. It is clear that human resource developers recognize that links to the knowledge society can be defeated within the theoretical humor superiority contexts.

The three key theories of humor that pervade some general assumptions of why humor exists are in all likelihood assimilated into complex and various rationales. Each theory results in different psychological processes. Despite the constricting notions of these theories, they force examination of social and broadened interests and contexts. Unfortunately, the research from a qualitative basis has been quantitatively systematic and forced, leaving questions about the combining of theories as the ultimate theoretical basis.

Offensive Humor and Critical Thinking

Humor tailored in a learning context can enhance adult learning. From that framework, the transformative creation of a sociologically improved worldview may have vast possibilities. However, inappropriate workforce learning and personal development that uses inappropriate humor can have significant negative effects when used under the ancient superiority theory. The perpetuation of verbal inaccuracies regarding gender, race, and dominance of a hegemonic culture may create an offensive and undesirable learning environment. The most serious issue of respect is primarily one of the most important in using humor in adult learning. Offensive humor is the wrong tool or strategy that can perpetuate a range of negative behaviors that may include humiliation, distrust, and feelings of insensitivity. Superiority theories may enhance humor for the dominant group, but perpetuate existing stereotypes and insensitive topics regarding the oppressed group. Most inappropriate humor is negatively impacting to the developing adult learners' views of cultural acceptance. Instructional effectiveness and relation to the educational message is most prominent in the research done by Bryant, Comisky, Crane, and Zillmann (1980). That research concluded that negative effects of hostile or sexually hostile humor resulted in low ratings of instructors by students across all dimensions. Furthermore, their research indicated that educational facilitators should use caution in their use of humor (p.113-116). Most especially, Berk (1998) states there is a risk in spontaneous humor, and the pitfalls to inappropriate humor, even when used as an instructional tool to improve communication, presents a negative consequence of offensive impropriety. Superiority theories manifest themselves in Berk's list of 10 offensive areas to avoid. He emphasizes avoid at all costs: 1) Put-downs of any individual including a popular entertainment of political personality 2) put downs of any group based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation3) sarcasm and ridicule 4) Sexual content and innuendo, 5) profanity and vulgarity, 6) humor about physical disabilities 7) humor about extremely sensitive issues (e.g., AIDS, abortion, divorce, personal tragedies) (45). The culturally diverse workforce that is knowledge based and global in scope, can certainly utilize appropriate humor to build bridges that perpetuate individual transformation and social inclusion. However, special attention must be taken to avoid offensive humor that has the reverse affect.

Aligning Non-Transformational Adult Learning and Humor

Problems exist with aligning humor and adult learning. Offensive humor can perpetuate superiority that underlies hegemony. In addition, humor often is sporadic and unprompted and can cause the greatest problem of misconception. The literature on how humor enhances learning is coming forward. There is scattered, discrepant

literature describing the cognitive implications of humor in the classroom. Some literature states retention and comprehension are improved. Yet, other research by Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) indicated that previous studies were inconclusive because they lacked evidence of humor as a strategy for comprehension. They claimed additional explanations are needed to demonstrate that retention and a significant difference in comprehension is achieved by using humor in the classroom (1977).

Incongruity lays the foundation for cognition and humor. Recent research suggests a cognitive shift is an explanation of incongruity theory. Accordingly Latta, states, "The basic humor process hinges on a cognitive shift, which entails that every episode of humor hinges on one essentiality, he states is "the ultimate cognitive-shift…"(1999, p. 49). Latta goes on to investigate definitions of incongruity and the judgments associated with humor. In summary, Latta (1999), states that incongruity theory is "indecisive and inconclusive" (p. 124) due to the wide ambiguity of the meaning of the word.

However, humor can help develop higher order cognition through incongruity**.** Goodman's (1992) theories indicate that humor plays a key role in problem solving, creativity, and a heightened awareness that can foster the free, exploration of options regarding new roles, relationships, and actions. Furthermore, an exaggeration of the out-of-context components of humor may be revered by cognitive complexities (Berk, 1998, Bryant, 1980et al, 1980, Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977, Fry, 1984, Powell& Andersen, 1985, Smith et al, 1971, Watson & Emerson, 1988).

An excellent example of the humor relief theory is noted by Boverie (et al 1994) in her article, *Humor in Human Resource Development.* In that article she states that humor may enable individuals to change their views of life events from their epistemological threatened perspectives to challenged, broadened views. According to Boverie, , being able to laugh at difficult situations indicates a powerful shift from identifying a crisis to handling crisis in a significant way. Additionally, interpersonal reasons for humor, such as gaining support of others in difficult times may also result in desired, supportive outcomes. (p.76). Even though these identifications may be affectively steeped in psychological underpinnings, a cognitive switch may take place before during of after the difficult situation.

Beneficial Applications of Humor in Adult Learning

Humor literature reveals a relationship between giftedness and creativity. Bridging new awareness and humor aligns purposeful learning with a twist. Divergent thought is incorporated in the physiological, psychological, social, and contextual aspects of humor and can be linked to adult learning. An exaggeration emphasized by out-of-context components of humor cognitively stimulates interest and increases motivation. Sharing humor and laughter about critical or difficult learning helps to facilitate the credible assumptions that link adult learning and humor. This point is supported by both humor theories of incongruity and relief. When a funny line is delivered at the right time to an understanding listener or viewer, the attitude toward the subject is enhanced. Satisfaction and comprehension with the subject is improved. ((Berk, 1998, Bryant, 1980et al, 1980, Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977, Fry, 1984, Powell& Andersen, 1985, Smith et al, 1971, Watson & Emerson, 1988).

A limited humor literature base states topic related humor in the classroom environment can greatly contribute to the point of the learning session. (Berk, 998, Hudson, 2001, Johnson, 1990). Well-developed skills in humor delivery are also key to invigorating learning. The right touch of relevant humor at the right time can perk up or illustrate important points in learning. Funny cartoons, quotes, observations, letters, and personal anecdotes and stories that convey humor in strategically important segments of learning, can add zest and relevance to learning. When used as a strategic application to learning enhancements, practiced appropriate humor can be essential to instructional effectiveness. All strategies apply to the positive aspects of incongruity and relief theory.

The possibilities are endless in applications of humor in adult learning. Yet, the foundational support and respect basic to the nature of learning must be provided through cohesive, nurturing and communication. Further appropriate humor may provide the links to the transformative learning process when used in context and strategically. Adult education through humor can provide a link to learning. As with humor, there are educational benefits linked with adult education from the psychological, physiological and sociological perspectives. Mezirow (1991) states: "The essence of adult education is to help learners construe experience in a way that allows them to understand more clearly the reasons for their problems and the action options open to them so that they can improve the quality of decision making. (p.203).

The basic fundamental guide for HRD professionals in fostering critical reflection is to allow empowerment through equal discourse and dialog. Through the application of humor, dialog and discourse can be stimulated in an interesting and promising way. Participation in adult learning work environments that foster validation and self-reflection of new learning can create ideal conditions for the fundamental components of transformation to occur. Understanding the learner's involvement in life long learning experiences that is demonstrated through dialog and

discourse fosters adult learners' inquiry. Further, including humor stimulates discussion and nurtures equal participation that is critical to the formulation of new roles and ideas outlined in Mezirow's perspective transformation. Humor when used in appropriate contexts can decrease impending, overwhelming uncertainties and promote clarity and promise about developing perspectives. Humor can provoke and facilitate an interesting learning environment.

According to Patricia Cranton (1994), "Fostering learner empowerment also involves setting the stage for critical self-reflection" (p. 159).   She indicated that by offering strategies for adult educators that create and enhanced learning environment, cultivates less divergence between learner experiences and new or conflicting information. She states: "[Providing] provocative readings, unusual events, outrageous statements, and unexpected activities can all help create and environment in which differences are not only acceptable but encouraged. This kind of atmosphere leads one to examine long-held assumptions or values"(1994, p. 159)

Popular humor can provide unusual events and outrageous statements. New frames of reference can be cultivated when presented in a humorous context. Popular humor can also perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce cultural values. Therefore, in creating a climate of acceptance as Cranton (1994) suggests, the environment will guide adults into the skills fundamental to critical thinking and reflective practice. Humor that causes a cognitive shift can facilitate meaning formulations for adult learners' and allow individual differences in non-threatening, non-judgmental environments to coexist. Yet, these formulations are some of the key challenges that face human resource developers in fostering the critical reflection process.

Operationalized Humor in Adult Transformative Learning

The critical reflection process is fundamental to transformative learning. Furthermore, motives for gaining insights can be indefinably individualized and unique. Beginning a learning session by using appropriate humor in context can provide the outrageous attention-getting strategy that can foster learning empowerment. Providing a funny story, joke, or riddle can diminish the introversion some adults may feel about certain upcoming learning activities. By applying humor to the broad contexts of work, human resource developers can use humor to express truth even when truth is repressed or feared. The median approach, somewhere between perpetuating hegemonic values and transformative regeneration of life experiences, is a pragmatic utility of humor that can impact learning simply because it adds an element of fun. Humor can help us cope with problems. Humor often succeeds when other methods have failed**.** By offering humor HRD professionals can offer an improved psychological, physiological and sociological setting to learn, explore and grow.

Sociological views of humor suggests that meaning and relationships can be facilitated through humor, laughter, and the common meaning and knowing that comes from communication. Human resource development that is challenging, yet fundamentally known and understood by worker learners can expand by using humor infused with existing knowledge about group camaraderie and playfulness. By supporting and challenging learning among adults, Daloz, (1986) and Boyd (1989) claim adult learners' growth can be promoted by developing group building exercises. Ultimately skilled human resource developers can build supportive relationships among groups over a short period of time. By beginning and interjecting appropriate humor, tensions can be lessened, and openness and support can be modeled. Group building can be stressed throughout the dynamic group learning processes, and fostered through contextual humor that is appropriately timed. Fostering and building on feelings of unity in groups can be enhanced through humor and laughter. Physiological, psychological, and sociological theories support the positive aspects of using humor in groups.

Humor as a Social Corrective

A general superiority statement that substantiates the triumph of one person or group of persons over another can facilitate amusement and hegemony at the same time. Humor may link attitudes and values that can mark transformative perspectives, especially in the instances of emotional turmoil and pain. Consequently, the inappropriate use of humor can backfire and adversely effect perspective transformation. Consider for example an oppressively dominant group egged on in a heightened negative awareness of their perceived superiority. By ridiculing an oppressed group, it is presumed the sociological implications of humor can bind the superior group's relations and can be used as a tool for developing solidarity, where their oppressive views are magnified. Herbert states in his article *Humor in the Classroom: Theories, Functions, and Guidelines,* "The more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaged person or thing, the more viable the use of humor becomes in elevating the magnitude of laughter" (p. 10). Further self-examination, self-reflection and critical assessment by the worker learner can be established about the inappropriately offensive, oppressive humor that was used. In those contexts, the heightened awareness can make new meanings of hegemony and oppression. Critical reflection can bring evaluation that bridges disconnections with previous frames of references, and fosters dawning of new assumptions.

The triggering humorous hegemonic event that jars established mental frames of references can foster perspective transformation.

Conclusions That Lead to Further Research

The social, contextual, and relational critical points of view lead to sharing, questioning, debating, and updating of the dominant cultural values of individuals. Critical reflection is a natural outcome of that process. The objective and subjective reframing that involve critical reflection, substantially permeates transformative learning, in relational ways that can initiate a substantial change and plan of action. I have reviewed that by applying the superiority theory of humor in a workforce learning context, the wrong views are endorsed. Using humor in the worst-case scenarios fosters superiority theory that can defy the foundational aspects of transformative learning such as understanding individual differences and the role of support in adult educational settings. The sensitivity of appropriate humor and awareness of classroom demographics are essential to avoiding offensive humor that undermines learning.

In this decade human resource developers are poised to attract and retain excellent workers, by training and educating workers in profound, and life changing ways. Central to adult learning and significant professional development is transformative learning. Humor is one tool that can advance attitudes of group camaraderie and interaction. Learning in groups potentially expands learning perspectives. Examining psychological perspectives, Gestalt theorists would agree changes the meaning of the whole to a cognitive factor, and accordingly could be the reason for adding a great punch line.

Berk (1998) states that adding humor throughout the learning process, adds unique interactions in the classroom can "…provide a powerful instructional package for our students"(p. 85). He goes on to list ten examples of techniques to operationalize and integrate humorous material into the learning environment. They are 1) Humorous material on the syllabus 2) Descriptors, cautions and warning s on handouts 3) Opening jokes 4) Skits and dramatizations 5) Spontaneous humor 6) Humorous questions 7) Humorous examples 8)Humorous problem sets 9) Jeopardy! type of reviews for exams, and 10) Humorous material on exams" (p.87). Using these techniques can incorporate appropriately used humor that may advance human resource development goals to a higher personal, professional, and organizational development through humor.

Yet, further research should be conducted to discover how life changing does it have to be before learners experience humor in appropriate contexts? What types of humor perpetuates perspective transformation? Where are the sociological boundaries that transform hegemonic views into the creative phenomena needed to perpetuate new altered worldviews that pave the way for the knowledge-based society? What are the links between essential elements of adult learning, human resource development, transformative learning and humor that can be beneficial?

Creativity and new ideas that facilitate the explorations of optional new roles, relationships, and actions can be enhanced through appropriate humor. The seeking of new functions and roles integrates plans for new actions that are central to transformational learning. Humor can build competence and self-confidence in assuming new roles. The trial and error process often developed in a reintegration of new perspectives originated in appropriate humorous contexts can enhance new phases of meaning. Altered views through humorous venues can facilitate the progression of group and individually related experiences. Furthermore, the acquisition of a new proficiency of knowledge, based on new meanings, is crucial to transformative learning. The relevance of this work is the review and infusion of the cornerstone of adult education, transformative learning and human resource development. The change that perpetuates the meaning of learning and work can advance engaged worker learners that can dramatically alter their individual meaning perspectives. It can foster cross-cultural demarcations and facilitate a knowledge-based society.

Future developments in this field may expand avenues to a knowledge based workforce that has implications toward a knowledge based, global society. Furthermore, humor can add links to the acquisition of new proficiency and new meanings that is crucial to adult transformational learning. The variance of human resource development that bridges workforce training and organizational development to creating the knowledge-based society relies on individualized transformative adult education. The growing interest offers hope for an advanced global workforce and a key role for the field of human resource development.

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