

## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ADULTS' PARTICIPATION IN DIALOGUE

Vicki Wiltse

This paper was inspired by Carol Lakey Hess's (1997) chapter, "Women and Conversational Education: Hard Dialogue and Deep Connections in Communities of Faith" in her book, *Caretakers of Our Common House*. In this chapter, she advocates for "conversational education" in faith communities, which means "getting people to engage one another in honest and deep ways" in order to "probe beneath the surface" and "question the way things are" (pp. 182-183). "To be a community of inquiry," Hess asserts, "means that in conversation people seek truth together, question unexamined assumptions, and challenge one another to go deeply into the search" (p. 190). Hess's concept of hard dialogue sounds similar to Jack Mezirow's "critical-dialectical discourse,"<sup>1</sup> which plays a key role in his theory of transformative learning, with one difference being that Hess is speaking in terms of the context of faith communities, while Mezirow is concerned with adult education in general. In my doctoral work, I have been striving to develop an understanding of how transformative learning might be facilitated in Christian congregations among adults who may not have college educations, much less graduate theological educations. How to engage persons at various levels of understanding and development in constructive conversations related to matters of belief and faith has been a major question in my mind. As Hess points out, "Honest and deep conversation is easily thwarted in communities of faith, sometimes by harsh adversarial argumentation that silences some voices, other times by polite affirming discussion that keeps conversation on a surface level" (p. 183). How does a religious educator prevent serious discussions from veering toward one of these two poles? A first step may be to consider where adults are developmentally, what their backgrounds are, and what is going on in their lives that might interfere with their abilities to engage effectively in critical-dialectical discourse or hard dialogue. This paper seeks to address one of these dimensions, development, by considering how persons' levels of development may influence the ways that they participate in discussions designed to invoke critical thinking and reflection.

### Prerequisites for Critical-Dialectical Discourse

Transformative learning, according to Mezirow (1991), is a form of development in adulthood, but it "does not follow clearly defined steps or stages" (p. 152). Rather, it is about transforming "problematic" meaning perspectives (frames of reference, worldviews, sets of orienting assumptions and expectations) into ones that are more inclusive, discriminating, integrative of experience, open to alternative perspectives, reflective, and emotionally capable of change. Sharan Merriam (2004) points out that many studies have demonstrated that development can be an outcome of transformative learning. She goes on to argue, however, that a certain level of development is necessary to engage in transformative learning, particularly the components of critical reflection and rational/reflective discourse. In relation to reflective discourse, Merriam states that engagement in it "assumes the ability to examine alternative perspectives, withhold premature judgment, and basically to think dialectically, a characteristic of mature cognitive development" (p. 61). Mezirow (2004) agrees with Merriam that persons do

---

<sup>1</sup> Mezirow has used the terms "rational discourse" and "reflective discourse" in the past, but "critical-dialectical discourse" appears to be his most recent terminology for this process (2003, 2004).

need to be at a certain level of development, specifically cognitive development, in order to be able to engage in transformative learning. He states that “what needs to be learned for transformative learning is critical reflection on assimilated epistemic assumptions and critical dialectical judgment to validate new assumptions” (pp. 69-70).

To get to the point of participating in the critical-dialectical discourse of transformative learning, one must have already engaged in self-examination and critical reflection on the assumptions underlying one’s beliefs or perspectives (premise reflection). Discourse, then, is where person’s new beliefs or frames of reference are discussed and evaluated. It is

that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief. This involves assessing reasons advanced by weighing the supporting evidence and arguments and by examining alternative perspectives. Reflective discourse involves a critical assessment of assumptions. It leads toward a clearer understanding by tapping collective experience to arrive at a tentative best judgment. (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 10-11)

Mezirow draws heavily on Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action for his understanding of critical-dialectical discourse and the optimal conditions for participation in it. Hess also finds Habermas’s norms for rational and valid discourse useful in pointing to the skills and guidelines needed for undistorted, deep conversation, although she points to the limitations of his model as well (p. 240). For Mezirow, the ideal conditions of discourse, which allow persons to “freely and fully participate,” are that participants have the following:

- More accurate and complete information
- Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception
- Openness to alternative points of view: empathy and concern about how others think and feel
- The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively
- Greater awareness of the context of ideas and, more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own
- An equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse [questioning, reflecting, challenging, refuting, and hearing others do the same (1991, p. 78)]
- Willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment. (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 13-14)

Over the years, Mezirow has acknowledged that these conditions have their own prerequisites. They “constitute a principle; they are never fully realized in practice” (2000, p. 14). In relation to personal development, in 1991, he discussed Karen Kitchener and Patricia King’s (1990) research on reflective judgment, which indicates that people have different levels of readiness to accept rational discourse as a means of solving problems. Later (2000, 2003), he mentioned that emotional maturity, or what Daniel Goleman (1995) calls “emotional intelligence,” is necessary for effective participation in reflective discourse and that having found

one's voice is a prerequisite for "free full participation" in discourse (2000, p. 11). However, as Merriam notes in her article on cognitive development and transformative learning, according to various studies, "many adults do not operate at higher levels of cognitive functioning" (p. 63). It is also obvious that not all adults have equal degrees of emotional maturity.

So what are religious educators who want to engage adults in hard dialogue to do? Before addressing that question, let us consider how people at various levels of development might approach critical-dialectical discourse or hard dialogue in faith communities.<sup>2</sup>

### Ways of Knowing

Both Mezirow and Hess mention that what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) call "real talk" is closely related to their ideals for discourse/dialogue. "Really talking" is dialectic rather than didactic; it requires careful listening; and "it implies a mutually shared agreement that together you are creating the optimum setting so that half-baked or emergent ideas can grow" (Belenky et al., p. 144). This type of "talk" is characteristic of women who have acquired the way of knowing Belenky and her associates call "constructive knowing." Constructivists have the most fully developed strategies for knowing.<sup>3</sup> If adult learners have not developed constructivist strategies for knowing, then how will they participate in dialogue?

Persons who are in the position of "silence" are often afraid to talk, because their speech has, in the past, led to punishment. They have survived by remaining silent, and therefore, they have not developed an awareness of the power of language, including the language of interior dialogue, to express thoughts, feelings, and insights. Their ways of knowing are limited to concrete, actual experiences or behaviors in the present. In a discourse situation, then, they would be passive, afraid to speak, not knowing what to say, because they basically do not have their own thoughts. They would feel like they could not understand what was being said because they feel unable to learn from others' words.

Received knowers learn by listening; they soak up information. They have little confidence in their ability to express original thoughts – truth comes from others, particularly authorities, so they just reproduce knowledge gained from external sources. In a group context, then, they will tend to conform to the beliefs and ideas of the group. If asked for their own opinion, they will feel confused, even frustrated, and incapable of giving an answer; in their minds, the authority should have the answer already. They are intolerant of ambiguity and seek clear, precise answers to dilemmas. The highest authority or the one with the most votes of support is the one they consider to be correct.

Received knowers are similar to persons in the dualism stage in William Perry's (1970) model of epistemological development. Both view the world in terms of absolute dichotomies: right-wrong, good-bad, black-white, we-they. There is only one correct answer to each question,

---

<sup>2</sup> I would like to note that the purpose of this paper is neither to support nor to critique Mezirow's theory, but to consider some possible hindrances to its implementation. Likewise, many critiques have been levied against the developmental theories I reference, but my intent is to use them as tools for understanding, not to imply their universal validity.

<sup>3</sup> While Belenky and her colleagues have been reluctant to state that their model consists of stages of development, they have acknowledged that "more fully developed individuals have a broader repertoire of knowing strategies to choose among in response to different situations; those with less developed capacities have fewer options, even in situations that warrant more flexible response" (Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler, 2000).

so all others are automatically wrong. Again, authorities are the ones who have the right answers. However, dualists (men) will tend to identify with the authorities and expect to gain the knowledge from them that will eventually turn them into authorities. This identification leads them to mimic authorities and, in contrast to received knowers, to lecture more than listen.

The third strategy in *Women's Ways of Knowing* is subjective knowing. Persons who have developed this strategy rely on intuition, or their inner voice, and their own experience and the experience of others like them for knowledge. Truth is personal; therefore, what is true for me is "just my opinion," and other persons have a right to their opinions. In Belenky et al.'s study of 135 women, almost half of them relied predominantly on this way of knowing (p. 55).

Subjective knowers share characteristics with Perry's multiplists.<sup>4</sup> Like them, they emphasize personal truth and consider all opinions equally valid. However, multiplists will tend to be more vocal about their views, insisting that their opinions are as good as the authority's ("I have a right to my opinion") and challenging others to argue with their positions. Their beliefs and perspectives distinguish them from others, and they let them know it. Subjective knowers, on the other hand, may function as "hidden multiplists." They will keep their views to themselves, afraid to take a stand in opposition to others because they fear losing relationships (they do not want to hurt others' feelings). They are more concerned with preserving connections than with establishing their unique identities, yet they may also be very closed off to alternative perspectives on a subject. They are also distrustful of analysis, logic, abstraction, and sometimes even language. Conflicts are resolved through referring to one's inner voice and experience or by searching for "what works for me" (Belenky et al., p. 70).

Those adults operating on the basis of procedural knowledge have turned to reason and the utilization of systematic procedures and criteria for obtaining, creating, and evaluating knowledge. They now believe that intuition is untrustworthy, but they have also come to a position where, through rational thought, they can know things they have never directly experienced. Because their inner voice has become critical, they fear sounding stupid, so they think before they talk and speak in measured tones, if they speak at all (Belenky et al., p. 94). They have come to realize the value of various points of view and now seek to know why people think the ways they do. There are two orientations to procedural knowledge: separate knowing and connected knowing. Separate knowers have learned to play the "doubting game" (p. 104). This involves distancing oneself from the object of knowing and examining it for weaknesses, errors, logical contradictions, or other lacks. Such knowers strive to set aside all feelings and personal beliefs in order to be "objective." They want to hear facts and logical arguments. Persons moving into Perry's stage of relativism will also engage in this process of analysis and comparison of views. However, for them, arguments really are impersonal; procedural separate knowers (women), on the other hand, tend to take critique personally and try to avoid it, just as subjective knowers do. Connected knowers practice the "believing game." They begin with an attitude of trust, assuming that others have something valuable to say, and then they draw upon their empathic abilities to come to understand other people on their own terms. They want to know what experiences led another person to her views, not so much what her reasoning process was. They are interested in hearing people's stories.

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Merriam (2004), one study has found the majority of adults to be in Perry's dualism stage, while another study found the majority to be in positions three or four of multiplicity (p. 63).

Robert Kegan's (1982) model of human development offers some additional insights into the ways in which persons might engage in critical-dialectical discourse. A person in his "Imperial Balance" (stage two) sees others in terms of how they can fulfill his needs or wishes, so this person may be experienced as being manipulative as he seeks to control others in order to be able to predict their behavior in relation to his own actions. Persons at this stage understand that they need to take turns for their own benefit, but they are unable to empathize with others' points of view and may be argumentative in maintaining and defending their own beliefs.

Transitioning from the Imperial Balance to the "Interpersonal Balance" (stage three), persons begin to experience themselves subjectively and are able to talk about their feelings. In the Interpersonal Balance, they value relationships because they define the self. Persons in this stage cannot express anger, because this would mean declaring themselves as selves "separate from the relational context" and would mean assuming that others can survive their anger (p. 97). In other words, persons in this stage assume that others, like themselves, interpret dislike, disagreement, critique, or anger as an attack on the self, so they will avoid such expressions themselves.

In the transition from the Interpersonal Balance to the "Institutional Balance" (stage four), persons may experience encouragement of individual voice as "abandonment, a refusal to care, and a disorienting vacuum of expectation" (p. 186). They are confused and troubled by demands to state what they believe and think, because their sense of having an individual perspective is just beginning to emerge. They need to feel connected and supported in this transition between stages, without becoming fused with others.

In the Institutional Balance, persons develop a sense of self, self-ownership, and self-dependence. They now have relationships, rather than being possessed by them, so they can set boundaries, and they respect, even value, differences. However, they cannot tolerate emotional conflict within themselves. "Successful internal maintenance and control" is their "ultimate concern" (p. 213). Therefore, the transition to the next and final stage, the "Interindividual Balance," can be quite disturbing. Persons in this transition may feel a sense of "boundary loss, impulse flooding, and, as always, the experience of *not knowing*. This last can speak itself in terms of felt meaninglessness" (p. 231). Self-conscious of their philosophical crisis, such persons may be cynical, having a sense that they have no morals, no standards, and that everything is relative. The Interindividual Balance (stage five), then, would be the ideal stage for persons to be in when they are engaged in critical-dialectical discourse. However, "Kegan's (1994) longitudinal research on levels of consciousness reveals that most adults are not capable of thinking dialectically (the fourth stage) until their 40s, and few adults were found to be at the trans-systems thinking of the fifth stage" (Merriam, 2004, p. 64).

Before sharing a method that may be able to facilitate dialogue among persons at various stages of development, I would like to suggest that, while persons may approach the subject matter of their career specialties from one stage of development, their approach to topics related to faith and belief may evidence a different level of development. For example, adults in James Fowler's Synthetic-Conventional Faith stage (stage three) tend to trust traditional religious authorities on matters related to faith. However, in their areas of expertise, they may be very independent and creative in their thinking and development of beliefs. Therefore, religious educators cannot assume that because a person is highly educated and is a critical thinker in her or his field that that person will also approach topics related to religious faith and belief from a similarly critical stance.

## Listening Circles

“Listening Circles” are a process for dialogue developed by Diane Kyser and Sandee Gamet for the Community of Christ (my denomination). This method was originally designed to engage members of this international denomination in dialogue on the issue of homosexuality in the church in order to promote understanding of various perspectives. Persons from around the world participated in Listening Circles on the topic of homosexuality at the 2004 World Conference of the Community of Christ. Listening Circles can be and have been used to discuss other difficult issues as well.

The intent of Listening Circles is to bring together a small group of four to ten people with differing perspectives on a controversial issue and to engage them in conversation with one another. The process is very structured and is guided by a trained facilitator. Before participating, persons agree in writing that the information and stories shared within the circle are to be kept confidential. This is necessary to ensure a foundation of trust. The basic process is for one person to share how he came to his perspective on the issue under discussion. Then a person with an opposing position reflects back to the first person what she heard him say. The first person verifies that the second person has understood him. Next, the second person shares her story, and a person from a different perspective reflects back what she said, and so on. Persons are allowed to ask one another questions out of curiosity and in order to gain better understanding, but not to challenge one another. Each person is also admonished to speak in terms of “I,” that is, from their personal experience, not in terms of “we,” or generalizations.

Listening Circles teach active listening skills and guide persons to discern and reflect upon the experiences and assumptions that have led them to their current feelings and beliefs about an issue. They encourage people to withhold judgment and to practice empathy in order to understand other persons’ perspectives from their points of view. They also lead to the identification and dismantling of misperceptions about oneself and others. Listening Circles, therefore, can be used as an educational method that teaches persons at various phases of development the skills they need to participate in higher levels of critical-dialectical discourse, while still achieving the goal of engaging them in some degree of “hard dialogue.”

## REFERENCES

- Community of Christ (2004-2007). *Listening Circles: Facilitated dialogue among church members and friends about difficult issues*. Retrieved April 25, 2007, from <http://www.cofchrist.org/peacejustice/listening-circles.asp>
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Hess, C. L. (1997). *Caretakers of our common house: Women’s development in communities of faith*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Kitchener, K. S. & King, P. M. (1990). The reflective judgment model: Transforming assumptions about knowing. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning* (pp. 159-176). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (2004). The role of cognitive development in Mezirow's transformational learning theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55, 60-68.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of Transformation Theory. In J. Mezirow (Ed.), *Learning as transformation* (pp. 3-33). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1 (1), 58-63.
- Mezirow, J. (2004). Forum comment on Sharan Merriam's "The role of cognitive development in Mezirow's transformational learning theory." *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55, 69-70.
- Perry, Jr., W. G. (1970) *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: a scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Taylor, K., Marienau, C., & Fiddler, M. (2000). *Developing adult learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.