

## **Exploring development of leadership capacities in undergraduate nursing students through transformative learning: A narrative review**

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### **Abstract**

Transformative learning (TL) is seen as an instructional reform in health professions education to develop leadership capacities and eventually produce change agents. This article explores the development of leadership capacities of nurse practitioners at an undergraduate level through TL practices. This exploration is based on an exploratory narrative review of literature on TL and leadership capacities. The potential contribution of this exploration of literature can be to raise consciousness among nursing academics about TL with the aim of engendering leadership capacities in their students. This article therefore poses the following question: What is TL and how can it be utilised in the development of leadership capacities in undergraduate nursing students? TL is an adult learning theory that involves an ongoing dialogical process towards self-actualisation and social empowerment of others. It proposes that human beings should expand their consciousness through critical reflection and discourse and, more importantly, act on the new assumptions and perspectives they attain. The preliminary review suggests that TL practices can be used to cultivate leadership capacities in undergraduate nursing students. It is proposed that application of the principles of TL theory be translated into an empirical study to provide evidence-based guidelines on developing leadership capacities in undergraduate nursing students.

**Keywords:** Transformative learning, leadership development, leadership capacities.

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### **Introduction**

In order to lead can be associated with engaging and evoking the potentialities of others towards some kind of desirable goal in a profession (Peters, 1970). Leadership in the nursing profession has been prioritised in the strategic plan for nursing education, training and practice through objective 3.4: “Enable strong leadership at all levels of nursing and midwifery practice” (Department of Health, 2013). At the same time, the National Development Plan (NDP) has called for “Leadership from all sectors of the society” as one of six key components to develop capacities and create opportunities for all South Africans (National Planning Commission, 2011: 27). Recent research has also attributed

the decline in the status of nursing to a lack of leadership and vision (Breier, Wildschut & Mgqolozana, 2009).

Simultaneously, higher education programmes are perceived as not preparing students adequately for their role in the society (Bhutta et al., 2010). There is also an appeal for higher education programmes to be more flexible and socially relevant to address the national priorities, of which health and education are two such priorities (National Planning Commission, 2011).

A major educational reform in health professional education is that of a systems-based approach to improve health care for all (Bhutta et al., 2010). This educational reform proposes that instructional and institutional reforms can take place through transformative learning (TL) and interdependence in education, where TL can hopefully develop leadership capacities and ultimately produce change agents and interdependence in education can promote a systems approach, which enhances networking and sharing of educational resources and innovations.

South African initiatives spurred by the Lancet report included the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) (2012) having a workshop on the Education of Health Professionals for the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the South African Committee of Health Sciences Deans, which utilised their annual conference of 2012 to discuss the report; the Health Professionals Council of South Africa Medical and Dental Professions Board Undergraduate, Education and Training subcommittee developed a core competency model framework: AfriMEDS (which originated from Canada as CanMEDS, but was contextualised for South Africa and embraced an instrument to measure social accountabilities of medical schools and the national Department of Health in its Human Resources for Health strategy, which proposes transforming health science education and developing 'change agents' (ASSAf, 2012).

It is therefore the intentions of this article to discuss, through a narrative review, what TL is and explore what contribution TL can make towards the development of leadership capacities in undergraduate nursing students.

## **Methodology**

A narrative literature review was undertaken to meet the objectives of this study. A narrative review is used to summarise a body of literature. In this study, the narrative review was selected as the best method to present a comprehensive understanding of TL and to explore whether TL is able to contribute towards developing leadership capacities in undergraduate nursing students. It is not the purpose of the article to assume the role of a qualitative or even systematic review but rather to present the present body of work around TL, which answers the questions of the research article.

The literature search for this paper was done electronically via Google Scholar and EBSCO host. The search words that were used were: *transformative learning*, *leadership capacities* and *leadership development*. The articles selected had to be peer reviewed and published in English language. The initial search concentrated on review articles on the key words identified. The search then focused on studies done in Africa on the mentioned key words. All the studies selected should have been published since 2000 and deemed relevant to our research questions. Two doctoral theses were also included as an extensive literature review was assumed to have taken place before embarking on the respective studies, which would further enhance the overview on what TL and leadership capacities entail. Three book chapters were also included, i.e. those by Mezirow (1997), Cranton (2002) and Taylor (2008). Only Mezirow's book chapter was published in 1997. Since it was the only direct source from the person, who is considered to be the author of TL theory, it was included. Altogether 12 articles were selected for this exploratory article. Five of the 12 selected articles were published in the *Journal of Transformative Education* between 2003 and 2011. The other seven articles were obtained from the *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *Educational Action Research*, *Nurse Education Today*, *The Leadership and Organizational Development Journal* and *Child and Youth Care Forum*.

## **Discussion**

The first part of this article gives an overview of the various perspectives on TL. The second part focusses on leadership capacities perceived to be needed in a nursing and African context while the final section centres on a discussion on teaching and learning practices using TL to develop leadership capacities in nursing students.

### *Perspectives on TL*

TL is an adult learning theory which involves fundamentally changing your frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, 2007, 2008). Jack Mezirow first proposed TL theory in 1978 after a study he conducted about a group of housewives that returned to higher education after having being housewives and mothers for a period of time (Gravett, 2004; Gabriel, 2008). Mezirow, together with Habermas, are perceived to have been influenced by Freire's notion of 'consciencisation', which posits that an individual must become critically aware of his/her circumstances in order to actuate change (Gabriel, 2008).

TL differs from andragogy and self-directed learning theories, which focus on adult principles, and instead focuses on the cognitive processes of learning (Brown & Posner, 2001). It proposes that a human being should be conscious and aware of his assumptions and perspectives (frame of reference), should

reflect and critically engage with them and be open to change or to adjust his assumptions and perspectives (perspective transformation) in order to create new assumptions and perspectives and, more importantly, to act on the new assumptions and perspectives (Gravett, 2004; Kitchenham, 2008). Perspective transformation is caused by transforming meaning schemes, usually brought about by acute personal or social crises (Taylor, 2008).

The key concepts in TL theory are critical reflection and rational discourse, and the main outcomes of the TL process are informed action, perspective transformation (a broader, more differentiated, integrated, reflective and complex perspective), an increase in personal autonomy and openness to learning (Gabriel, 2008; Snyder, 2008).

Many other articulations of Mezirow's TL theory have since emerged, in which new dimensions have come to the fore, for example the role of spirituality (especially in the African context), positionality, emancipatory learning and neurobiology.

Besides Mezirow's psychocritical view of TL theory, alternative viewpoints include the psychodevelopmental, psychoanalytic and social emancipatory. Most recently the neurobiological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric and planetary view of TL theory arose (Taylor, 2008).

#### *Leadership capacities for nursing and African contexts*

The report in *The Lancet* (Bhutta et al., 2010) proposed using TL as a teaching practice to develop leadership capacities. However, the literature exploration suggests that limited research exists on whether TL is utilised in undergraduate nursing curricula in South Africa, and how it can cultivate leadership capacities in students (Mkhize, 2009).

In South Africa the Minister of Health identified leadership as the Human Resources for Health strategy's "Priority Number 1" (Department of Health, 2011). The Minister attributed the weakness manifesting itself in the health sector to poor management and leadership at all levels of the health system.

Preece (2003) noted that leadership in African contexts should respect the identity of Africans, yet at the same time be able to transform challenges such as poverty, health and civic responsibilities. A leadership style that finds affinity with African cultures is that of transformative leadership (TLS). Why? Avoseh, in Preece (2003), posits that the values of TLS are closely link to cultures that embrace spirituality such as the African cultures, for example Ubuntu in South Africa and Botho in Botswana. TLS is preferred in an African context, but should take into consideration the cultural values of spirituality, communality and politics. In developing leadership capacities for nursing students it is thus important that issues such as ethical values, spirituality, indigenous knowledge systems, context, charisma and continuous learning are explored (Preece, 2003).

Brown and Posner (2001) claim that leadership development is a learning process and should involve both personal and emotional aspects, which should trigger self- and critical reflection. At the same time, support should be made available when persons (in our case, students) are taken through processes of meaning-making and change. For Brown and Posner (2001) TL theory can be utilised to assess, strengthen and create leadership programmes to develop transformational leaders. In the following section we discuss strategies to develop leadership capacities through TL.

*Application of TL teaching strategies to develop leadership capacities*

The review also intended to explore how TL can be applied to teaching and learning strategies to promote leadership capacities in undergraduate nursing students. Lynam (2009) proposes the use of critical pedagogies such as narratives and dialogue to foster reflection, engagement and dialogue to create an awareness of underlying assumptions, the strategy of critical questioning to illicit reflective dialogue, and the use of case studies. In our School of Nursing we do use the case-based strategy, but we do believe it is not utilised to its full potential. Kear (2013) developed a model for TL where the common thread through all of the elements is that of human interaction. This is in line with Mezirow's theory of TL and was taken into account when proposing the strategies that follow. For the purposes of this article we made use of TL and leadership as the topics in the strategies, but any topic may be applied.

The first proposed strategy is an open discussion of the key components of TL (their experiences, critical self-reflection, discourses they indulge in, etc.) and leadership (what it means to them, do they think it is important for them, etc.), which aims to create an awareness of TL and the leadership capacities needed as a nursing student. This strategy corresponds with Lynam's (2009) and Fetherston and Kelly's (2007) engagement and dialogue, which may also expose our students to more than one viewpoint.

The second strategy will entail reflective portfolios or even narratives, as proposed by Lynam (2009) and Fetherston and Kelly (2007), that can be used from first year through to their final year on completion of each semester, to illicit whether and how TL took place. Guidelines can be given to create, support and encourage writing of reflective portfolios. Jensen and Joy in Kear (2013) found that students do need guidance in how to reflect, and there should be reinforcement after the initial instruction as students' level of reflectivity decreases over time. Students can be asked to write about, for example, their best or worst experience, what happened, who was involved, what made it best or worst and how could it be different, what their thoughts and feelings were and why they felt that way. The focus should also be on what practices and processes need improvement in health care settings, using students' own experiences (Stein et al., 2005). This will stimulate exploring ethical values, different contexts,

diversity in spirituality and indigenous knowledge systems that guide leadership principles, and explore how they can become 'change agents' (Preece, 2003). Since TL theory constitutes the theoretical framework, the portfolios can help students to, firstly, identify an event triggering an assumption; secondly, describe the assumption; thirdly, reflect on where it came from, what the consequence was and why it was important; fourthly, students to assess whether they are open to new ideas; and fifthly, what these new ideas may be (students to possibly write letters addressing a view opposite to theirs).

The third type of teaching and learning strategy can be generated through small group discussions in the classroom, which at the same time generate a fourth type of learning material that can be used for review during feedback sessions. This can be recorded as podcasts or videos on the educators' cellular phones. Group discussions can be utilised when data are required on ideas, attitudes, perceptions and understandings which are rich and complex. It also combines communication skills, group interaction and constructive feedback from peers, which are leadership capacities identified in the literature explored (Preece, 2003; Stein et al., 2005). These sessions can continue until no more new information on TL and leadership capacities seems to be forthcoming. Small group and classroom discussions can consist of six to eight students.

Small group and classroom discussions can be audio-taped and transcribed to identify differences between just discussion and actual discourse taking place, where assumptions can be explored in discourses (the optimal conditions for discourse being having accurate and complete information, being free from coercion and distorting self-deception, weighing evidence and assessing arguments, being open to alternative perspectives, critically reflecting on presuppositions, having equal opportunity to participate, and accepting informed consensus as valid knowledge) (Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 2002). The following are possible questions that can be asked: Can revised assumptions or perspectives be reached, and if we do, how are we going to act on these revised assumptions? Do these actions call for leadership capacities, and what are they?

Hence, based on the teaching and learning strategies proposed, the authors envisage taking the students through the process of transformation whilst at the same time addressing how leadership capacities can be engendered through TL.

## **Conclusion**

Through TL it is our contention that the development of leadership capacities should commence at an undergraduate level. TL and teaching might help us to attain the premise that TL can inculcate in students a consciousness to look at their points of view critically and then act appropriately towards enhancing change.

Hopefully, as a corollary of students' acquired capacities and skills in and about TL, they would be favourably positioned to enact meaningful and critical change in the exercising of their professions.

This exploration also suggests that the above application of the principles of TL theory can be translated into an empirical study to provide evidence-based guidelines on how leadership can be developed through TL.

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