

## The Doctor of Ministry Cohort As A Transformative Dialogue Group

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Transformative Dialogue in a Doctor of Ministry Program can function as a transformative learning experience that fosters Professional Ministry Development for ministers. Transformative dialogic moments shape the identity of learners by means of creating learning spaces to facilitate Professional Ministry Development. The sharing, respect, and commitment to the ideas and needs of the group can serve as a *mephato* which is a cohort called together to receive training and/or mobilize each other to construct useful knowledge together as a collective. These groups or cohorts provide a unique container for transformative learning within their relationships fostered through self-awareness, group identity, and critical consciousness. Triggered by moments of cognitive dissonance, the Doctor of Ministry group works and dialogues in peer sessions and unique ministry contexts as a means for personal and social transformation. Transformative Learning literature emphasizes the role of relationships with others in such a group as the Petri dish— the growth-supporting environment— that provides both the container and space in which such learning can occur, and the dialogical processes through which learning takes place. In this article, the authors explore the concept of Transformative Dialogue Groups as a development tool for Professional Ministry Training in a Doctor of Ministry cohort or *mephato*.

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### **Transformative Learning in Adult Education<sup>3</sup>**

Transformative Learning,<sup>4</sup> introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978, is a theory of adult learning in which individuals learn to critically examine prior assimilated frames of reference, mindsets, and systems of belief. Transformative Learning occurs as a result of individuals examining and reflecting on prior held assumptions and expectations and, finding them to be problematic, revising those expectations. Throughout the course of an individual's lifetime, belief systems become frames of reference or what Mezirow terms as meaning perspectives through which all experiences are filtered and understood.

Distinguishing between adult learning and formative learning by assessing the latter as the process by which knowledge is gained as a result of traditional educational programs is one of the key components of Transformative Learning Theory. During the formative learning process, individuals acquire knowledge as a result of assimilating information acquired in childhood often from parents, teachers, and other authority figures. Information gained during this time is taken in uncritically and involves information taken for granted such as values, beliefs, stereotypes, distortions, and prejudices. Transformative Learning is the process of examining, questioning, and revising prior formative learning through critical reflection. Within this process, learners assess the integrity of deeply held assumptions in order to bring about new ways of defining their worldview.

The Transformative Learning process initiates inconsistencies between prior and current state of beliefs or cognitive dissonance. Mezirow envisioned this dissonance to trigger the process that forces learners to begin self-examination and to scrutinize their set of assumptions or beliefs: an event he calls a disorienting dilemma.<sup>5</sup> Once triggered, the learner progresses through the ten steps of the transformative

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough treatment of Transformative Learning in Adult Education the reader is referred to the book: Edward W. Taylor and Patricia Cranton, *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice* (San Francisco : John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Jack Mezirow *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Jack Mezirow. *Learning As Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 21.

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learning process which involves an accretive process of altering specific beliefs imposed by external trigger events and which force individuals to challenge the premise of their original frame of mind or habits of expectations. Mezirow acknowledged that a disorienting dilemma could be an evolutionary or revolutionary process involving incremental shifts in consciousness. These shifts in consciousness can be epochal or incremental events over an individual's lifetime<sup>6</sup> and can result in personal disequilibrium which changes an individual's perspective.<sup>7</sup> According to Mezirow's theory, Transformative Learning occurs across the following phases:

1. a disorienting dilemma;
2. self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;
3. a critical assessment of assumptions;
4. recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
5. exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions;
6. planning of a course of action;
7. acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing ones' plans;
8. provisional trying of new roles;
9. building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective<sup>8</sup>

Transformative Learning occurs as a result of an internally imposed disorienting dilemma. Progression through the ten phases of Transformative Learning varies across and in accordance with individual's unique circumstances. This transformation may involve objective or subjective reframing. In reframing, individual's points of view are transformed through critical reflection on the content of a problem or on the process of problem solving, thus, resulting in perspective transformation.

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor and Cranton, *The Handbook on Transformative Learning*.

<sup>7</sup> Edward W Taylor. "The Theory and Practice of Transformative Learning: A Critical Review." ERIC Publications, no. 374. (1998): 41.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor and Cranton, *The Handbook on Transformative Learning*, 86.

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### **The Doctor of Ministry Focus Group**

The Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree is an Association of Theological Schools (ATS) defined degree. According to the ATS Degree Standards,<sup>9</sup> the purpose of the DMin degree is to enhance the practice of ministry. This degree is designed for persons experienced in substantial ministerial leadership who wish to enhance their competencies in pastoral analysis and ministerial skills. Persons participating in an ATS approved DMin program are required to “design and complete a written doctoral-level project that addresses both the nature and the practice of ministry.”<sup>10</sup>

Many DMin programs operate on a cohort basis, whereby a group of students will go through the program and finish together. The DMin cohort can adapt the characteristics of Focus Group Research<sup>11</sup> in defining a DMin Focus Group. A Focus Group is generally thought of as a qualitative research method whereby a small (normally 6 to 12) group of participants are led by a moderator to explore the probable success of a particular commodity. The moderator would guide the participants through a series of questions to explore nuances of the commodity. This technique can be used in exploring issues in the practice of ministry. A mentor for the cohort, who has expertise in the ministry issue, can serve as moderator of the focus group and the DMin students can serve as the participants. Each participant will examine the ministry issue through the lens of their particular context. It could be further stipulated that the DMin projects the students will work on should address the same ministry issue but approached through different contexts and from different perspectives. As an example, a DMin Focus Group whose ministry issue is Christian Education would be mentored by a person with a terminal degree and practical experience in Christian Education. Persons joining the group would understand that the particular ministry issue of the group is Christian Education.

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<sup>9</sup> ATS Degree Program Standards, <http://www.ats.edu/accrediting/standards-and-notations>, accessed November 5, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> David L. Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997).

## **Collaborative Learning and Social Constructivism in a Transformative Dialogic Group**

Social Constructivism,<sup>12</sup> as discussed by Beck and Kosnik, operates as an essential element to group learning within the Transformative Learning Process. Constructivist assumptions hold that individuals interpret their experiences in their own way as a result of their perceptions and understandings. Collaborative inquiry, as a part of Transformative Learning, is a process of examining, questioning, and revising those perceptions and experiences within the context of groups. Such groups, known as Transformative Dialogic Groups, are delineated as a collection of individuals who are there to support each other's personal learning with a goal of self-discovery in the context of relationship with others.<sup>13</sup> These groups provide a unique container for Transformative Learning by fostering critical self-reflection brought on by members' commitment to the group. The DMin Focus Group in which Collaborative Inquiry takes place, operates as a container or space that supports personal growth and change. This article takes the position that a DMin Focus Group can provide a context for Transformative Learning utilizing a dialogical approach. The Doctor of Ministry Focus Group can function as a growth-supporting environment to facilitate a dialogical encounter of group members as they process through the ten steps of Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory.

Engaging in group dialogue functions as a conduit for fostering critical reflection in the process of Transformative Learning. This critical reflection can take place on three levels: within the ministry context, between peers, and within the academy with ministry professionals. At the ministry context level, each person in the DMin Focus Group works with a group of stakeholders within their ministry context which can be referred to as Context Associates. DMin students participating in dialogue within this group of Context Associates will facilitate reflection, action, and analysis to assist them with addressing real issues within the ministry context. Additionally, group dialogue with Context Associates can assist the student with research to enhance their study of the ministry context. This research includes the congregation, its location, history, community in which it is located, characteristics, strengths, and perception of its need.

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<sup>12</sup> Vygotsky, Lev. *Mind in Society*. (London: Harvard University Press, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> Taylor and Cranton, *The Handbook on Transformative Learning*, 361.

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In the process of examining the ministry context, Context Associates enter into group dialogue for reflection, action and analysis to assist the DMin student with the development of their Doctor of Ministry project.

At the peer level, a part of the group dialogic process allows focus group members to assist each other by providing safe, trusting, and respectful learning environments for peer reactions. These reactions involve an individual or intrapersonal process of critical reflection or discernment in genuine dialogue with others working toward similar goals. Within these groups; dialogue occurs on a relational basis where members are fully present with one another in the ongoing processes of relating, often eliciting a disorienting dilemma or dissonance. This dissonance or seeming contradiction among peer group members is grist for transformative group work. To the extent that peer group dialogue highlights dissonance, perspective transformation can occur at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup levels.

Group dialogue with ministry professionals can evoke what Shapiro et al, calls a critical systemic consciousness: the social emancipatory approach to Transformative Learning. This level of dialogue induces a contextual critical consciousness as suggested by Paulo Freire in his *conscientization*.<sup>14</sup> The focus here is on understanding and changing shared aspects of group members' social realities, locations, and contexts.<sup>15</sup> Such a level of dialogue works to understand the ways in which the structural and systemic causes of what may be first perceived as personal problems or limitations. The social emancipatory approach involves any process in which individuals reflect together on the shared aspects of their realities and develop a deeper understanding of the structural and systemic limitations to their full participation.<sup>16</sup> Professional group dialogue reflects on individual's lived experiences as well as what plays out in the group's current internal dynamics. As a result, group consciousness is elevated through dialogue about how oppression and/or injustice is occurring elsewhere and what can be done to interrupt it.

In addition, dialogue with the academic disciplines focuses upon shared inquiry into issues related to oppression and liberation. Here, the emphasis centers upon unpacking and transforming collective, internalized oppression and domination. Students are able to engage in

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<sup>14</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Taylor and Cranton, *The Handbook on Transformative Learning*, 366.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 367.

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Action Research<sup>17</sup> through collaborative inquiry among groups emphasizing shared inquiry into issues related to oppression and liberation. Although collaborative inquiry can involve a group exploration of any question of shared interest, it incorporates repeated Action Research cycles of inquiry, action, reflection, and dialogue.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Doctor of Ministry Transformative Dialogue Focus Group**

The DMin Focus Group can function as a Transformative Dialogue Group which focuses on a particular ministry issue. Schapiro, Wasserman, and Gallegos have commented on the transformative power of dialogue and have suggested “dialogue as a process through which people in groups can explore their assumptions and ways of meaning making.”<sup>19</sup> They suggest the group can function as a growth-supporting environment that provides the container and space for learning to occur, as well as the dialogical process through which learning unfolds. Peggy Gabo Ntseane looks at Transformative Learning from an African perspective and has suggested ‘the role of elders is also important for transformative learning because of the knowledge embedded in their wisdom and experiential learning.’<sup>20</sup> She also uses the African term *mephato* to refer to a cohort called together to receive training and mobilize each other to construct useful knowledge together as a collective.<sup>21</sup> This article is suggesting that the DMin Focus Group is able to function as a *mephato* to appropriate knowledge in a given ministry issue with the purpose of improving the quality of ministry for the church. The mentor of the DMin Focus Group is seen as the elder providing the wisdom and training for the *mephato*. This objective is consistent with the requirements of the DMin program as defined by ATS.

Schapiro, Wasserman, and Gallegos have suggested three kinds of transformative group work that facilitate Transformative Learning in the transformative dialogue group, namely:

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, ed. *The Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), p 366.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor and Cranton, *The Handbook on Transformative Learning*, 367.

<sup>19</sup> Steve Schapiro, Ilene Wasserman, and Placida Gallegos, “Group Work and Dialogue” in *Handbook on Transformative Learning*, 356.

<sup>20</sup> Peggy Gabo Ntseane, “Transformative Learning Theory: A Perspective from Africa” in *Handbook on Transformative Learning*. p 274 – 286.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

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- Personal growth and awareness
- Relational empathy across differences
- Critical systemic consciousness

The DMin Focus Group functioning as a *mephato* has the strong potential to facilitate these different types of group work in Transformative Learning. To facilitate personal growth and awareness, DMin students will develop a Spiritual Autobiography. The discussion of the Spiritual Autobiography within the *mephato* facilitates what Mezirow calls critical reflective discourse. Such discourse permits the critical examination of beliefs, feelings, and values that were uncritically assimilated primarily during the formative learning years. Relational empathy across differences is examined through the dialogue process in a peer environment. Each participant represents a different context and is able to see some of their own issues through the eyes of others in the *mephato*. The fact that the *mephato* is focusing on a particular ministry issue through collaborative inquiry provides a critical systemic consciousness.

### **Conclusion**

DMin Transformative Dialogue Focus Groups or *mephatos* have the potential to provide substantive research and investigation for the purpose of advancing personal and social transformation for the individual, the ministry context, and the church in general. Group dialogue within the *mephato* with others of like mind facilitates an individual's growth as they work toward effecting necessary changes in relationships, organizations, and systems. Such dialogue fosters critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse which promotes group deliberation and group problem solving. At its optimum level, the DMin Transformative Dialogue Focus Group or *mephato* can be organized to address issues such as social injustice, domestic violence, homelessness, police brutality, and other social ills the church is called to confront. Such an approach to ministry problem solving can serve as catalyst for initiating movements for addressing oppression. Focusing on the realities of oppression with the intent to alter them fosters an elevation in consciousness about how it is occurring elsewhere and stimulates conversation on how to interrupt it. In essence, this is the demonstration and culmination of perspective transformation as a result of group dialogic work.



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