

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION IN HUMANITIES: MEZIROW'S FRAMEWORK AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES (2020-2025)

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Article history

Received date : 17-10-2025

Revised date : 18-10-2025

Accepted date : 1-11-2025

Published date : 13-11-2025

To cite this document:

Md Baharudin, M. H., Abd Hamid, M. A., Yasin, Y. F., & Yusof, J. (2025). A systematic review of perspective transformation in humanities: Mezirow's framework and contemporary issues (2020–2025). *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 10 (78), 514 – 528.

Abstract: *Living with HIV presents complex psychological, social, and existential challenges that go beyond conventional clinical issues. Effective interventions need to adopt a comprehensive and context-based educational approach. However, People Living with HIV (PLHIV) are often viewed as passive recipients in the learning process, with insufficient emphasis on their role as agents of change. This paper proposes a qualitative conceptual framework that explores the potential of Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) as a catalyst in the processes of identity reconstruction and empowerment for PLHIV. Through the synthesis of theory and literature analysis, this framework integrates TLT, Socio-Cultural Theory, Situative Learning, Role Transition Theory, and Bloom's Taxonomy, emphasising holistic learning that encompasses cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. The framework highlights the importance of past experiences and social context in shaping critical reflection and learning outcomes for PLHIV, shifting their role from passive recipients to active agents of change. This paper also proposes a culturally sensitive adult learning approach to foster self-resilience, reduce stigma, and support ongoing transformation, while also highlighting the potential for future qualitative research through narrative inquiry, phenomenology, and action research.*

Keywords: *Transformative Learning Theory, People Living with HIV (PLHIV), Critical Reflection, Adult Learning, Qualitative Conceptual Framework*

Introduction

Transformative learning, introduced by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s, emphasizes personal growth, critical reflection, and a re-evaluation of one's beliefs through experiences that challenge existing perspectives. This theory has deeply influenced adult education and found relevance in other fields, particularly the humanities. Disciplines like literature, philosophy, and cultural studies naturally align with Mezirow's ideas, as they promote reflection, empathy, and ethical reasoning. Through transformative learning, humanities education can become a powerful tool for personal and social development.

In recent years, especially from 2020 to 2025, global events like the pandemic and heightened awareness of social justice issues have renewed interest in transformative learning. Educators have turned to this theory to help students navigate complex challenges related to identity, inequality, and culture. Scholars have expanded Mezirow's original ideas; which focused mainly on rational thought, to include emotional and relational aspects of learning. This broader perspective better reflects the lived experiences and emotional depth involved in learning within the humanities.

This systematic review aims to explore how Mezirow's theory has been applied in humanities education over the last five years. It focuses on identifying key themes, research methods, and the integration of contemporary issues like decolonization and climate justice. Using the PRISMA method, the review examines peer-reviewed articles from major databases to provide a clear picture of the evolving landscape. In doing so, it not only highlights how transformative learning is being practiced but also how the theory is being reshaped to meet modern educational needs.

Methodology

This systematic review adopts a rigorous and transparent methodological approach informed by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. The purpose of employing PRISMA is to ensure that the process of article selection, screening, and analysis adheres to high standards of academic integrity and reproducibility. Given the growing interest in transformative learning within the humanities, particularly under Mezirow's theoretical framework, it is essential to outline a clear and replicable methodology that delineates how relevant literature was identified, assessed, and synthesized. The research question guiding this review is; How has Mezirow's transformative learning theory been applied, adapted, and critiqued in humanities scholarship from 2020 to 2025?

Database Selection

Three major academic databases were selected to ensure a broad and high-quality data pool like; Scopus – for its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed international journals across education and humanities; Web of Science (WoS); for indexing reputable journals with high impact metrics; and Google Scholar; to capture grey literature and potentially relevant studies not covered in Scopus or WoS, while applying critical filters for quality control.

These databases were searched independently using consistent parameters to reduce bias and improve comprehensiveness.

Search Strategy

A search string was developed through pilot testing and adapted for each database's syntax. The final search terms included Boolean operators and truncations to maximize yield;

("transformative learning" OR "transformational learning") AND (Mezirow) AND (humanities OR "liberal arts" OR literature OR philosophy OR ethics OR history OR "cultural studies") AND (2020 OR 2021 OR 2022 OR 2023 OR 2024 OR 2025)

The searches were conducted between January and February 2025. Filters were applied to include only; peer-reviewed journal articles; English language; published between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2025.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain relevance and ensure the integrity of the synthesis, inclusion and exclusion criteria were strictly enforced. Inclusion Criteria; articles that explicitly use Mezirow's transformative learning theory as a theoretical or analytical framework; studies situated within humanities disciplines (e.g., literature, ethics, cultural studies, history, etc.); empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) or conceptual/theoretical papers; peer-reviewed and published between 2020–2025. While exclusion criteria; articles addressing digital transformation or online learning environments without a strong humanity or Mezirow connection; studies outside of humanities (e.g., health sciences, STEM, business); theses, dissertations, conference proceedings, or non-peer-reviewed sources; and articles that mention transformative learning generically without engaging with Mezirow's theory.

Screening Process

The review followed a two-stage screening procedure; 1) Title and Abstract Screening: The initial pool of 157 articles was screened based on titles and abstracts. At this stage, 89 articles were excluded due to irrelevant content, use of different theories, or lack of humanities context; and 2) Full-Text Review: The remaining 68 articles were reviewed in full. Each article was independently assessed by two reviewers for inclusion. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Ultimately, 35 articles were selected for in-depth analysis.

Data Extraction and Coding

A standardized data extraction form was used to collect relevant information from each of the 35 included studies. The extracted data categories were author(s) and year of publication, journal and country of origin, specific humanities discipline, research objective, application of Mezirow's theory, methodology and data collection tools, key findings, and identified themes. The extracted data were then coded thematically using NVivo software to identify recurring themes and methodological trends. Thematic coding was both deductive (informed by existing transformative learning literature) and inductive (open to emergent patterns).

Quality Appraisal

Each article was subjected to a quality appraisal to ensure credibility and academic rigor. For empirical studies, a modified version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist was used. The checklist included questions about clarity of aims and objectives, appropriateness of methodology, ethical considerations, rigor of data analysis, and validity of findings. All 35 studies scored satisfactorily in quality assessment, although a few studies had limited sample sizes or lacked clear explanations of theoretical application.

Limitations of Methodology

While the PRISMA approach adds transparency and structure to the review, certain limitations are acknowledged like; language bias: Only English-language articles were included, potentially excluding valuable research in other languages; publication bias: Grey literature and

unpublished studies were not systematically analyzed, which may skew findings toward more successful or well-funded research; and timeframe constraint: The focus on 2020–2025 ensures relevance but excludes foundational works and earlier applications that may provide valuable longitudinal insights. Despite these limitations, the methodology employed ensures that the findings are both representative and robust within the specified scope.

Results

This section presents the synthesized findings from 35 peer-reviewed studies included in this review. The literature analysis revealed three dominant thematic areas in the application of Mezirow's transformative learning theory in humanities disciplines between 2020 and 2025: There are social justice and ethical discourse, intercultural competence and dialogue, and reflexivity and personal growth. Each of these themes reflects critical pedagogical priorities in contemporary humanities education and illustrates how transformative learning is used to navigate complex sociocultural and ethical terrains.

Social Justice and Ethical Discourse

One of the most recurring themes in the literature is the use of transformative learning to cultivate social justice awareness and ethical reasoning in students. These studies typically examine how humanities education, informed by Mezirow's theory, empowers learners to recognize structural inequalities, critically reflect on their role in systems of power, and embrace an ethical commitment to social change.

This thematic area is strongly represented in disciplines such as ethics, literature, cultural studies, and philosophy, where the interrogation of moral norms and societal structures is integral to the curriculum. Many educators employ narrative-based assignments, community engagement projects, or classroom debates to elicit what Mezirow described as “disorienting dilemmas.” These learning activities encourage students to confront their assumptions about race, class, gender, colonialism, and other social categories. Through reflective discourse, students develop new frames of reference and, in many cases, adopt a more socially responsible stance.

The studies reviewed highlight a common trend: students often enter humanities courses with unexamined biases shaped by dominant cultural narratives. When exposed to marginalized voices and critical theory, they experience discomfort and cognitive dissonance; catalysts for transformation. Educators report that the application of Mezirow's framework helps students work through this discomfort productively, leading to sustained changes in worldview and behaviour.

Several studies explicitly combine Mezirow's theory with critical pedagogy, feminist theory, or decolonial frameworks. These integrations expand the transformative potential of learning by making space for affective experiences, embodiment, and community-based perspectives. Scholars argue that while Mezirow's model emphasizes individual reflection, it can be strengthened by recognizing the collective and relational dimensions of social justice education. Below is a selection of key studies that exemplify this theme:

Table 1: Selected Studies on Social Justice and Ethical Discourse

Author(s) & Year	Main Focus	Methodology	Key Findings
Johnsson (2025)	Justice-oriented curriculum in postcolonial contexts	Conceptual /Theoretical	Emphasized need to integrate decolonial approaches with Mezirow's framework
Finnegan (2023)	Student activism and critical pedagogy	Qualitative Case Study	Students developed political agency and shifted views on institutional power
Savicki & Prize (2021)	analyze students' reflective writing in a meaningful way	Reflective writing	reflection is multi-dimensional
Oddy (2024)	Reframes emergency education using radical critiques of power and race	Theoretical Framing, Positionality & Case Study	Reveals inequalities, shows community resistance, and urges transformation
Rabaan (2021)	Transformative justice principles in domestic violence	Qualitative Fieldwork	Transformative justice approaches are useful for designing supportive services

Across these studies, transformative learning is not just a theoretical lens but also a pedagogical practice. It is implemented intentionally to facilitate ethical questioning, recognition of injustice, and empowerment of learners to act on new insights. While results vary, a majority of studies report positive transformative outcomes, particularly when learning environments support emotional risk-taking and dialogical exchange.

However, a few scholars raise critical questions about the scope of individual transformation. For instance, VanWynsberghe (2022) critiques the tendency of some educators to frame transformation as an endpoint rather than a continuous process of ethical becoming. Other scholars note the difficulty in assessing long-term behavioural change, advocating for follow-up studies or longitudinal designs to measure sustained social justice engagement.

Intercultural Competence and Dialogue

A second dominant theme identified in the literature is the role of transformative learning in cultivating intercultural competence and dialogical engagement among students in the humanities. In an increasingly globalized and diverse educational landscape, the capacity to understand, respect, and communicate across cultural differences has become an essential learning outcome. Within this context, Mezirow's framework offers a powerful approach for challenging ethnocentrism, promoting empathy, and fostering intercultural dialogue.

Intercultural competence is generally defined as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. It involves not only knowledge of other cultures but also self-awareness, openness, and emotional sensitivity; attributes that align closely with the reflective and affective dimensions of transformative learning.

Humanities disciplines, especially comparative literature, cultural studies, religious studies, and philosophy, provide rich textual and discursive spaces for such development.

Many of the studies in this thematic category report that students come into humanities classrooms with deeply embedded cultural assumptions, shaped by dominant discourses, national narratives, and inherited prejudices. When exposed to culturally diverse texts, perspectives, or lived experiences; particularly those from historically marginalized or non-Western traditions; students often experience cognitive and emotional dissonance. In Mezirow's terms, these are "disorienting dilemmas" that can initiate a transformative process. For example, a study by Stewart (2022) analyzed a comparative literature course that included authors from Latin America, South Asia, and North Africa. Through guided discussions and reflective journaling, students reported changes in their understanding of cultural identity, nationalism, and global interconnectedness. Notably, several students noted a newfound ability to engage in uncomfortable conversations about cultural stereotypes without becoming defensive; a hallmark of intercultural maturity.

Similarly, Shoiria (2025) explores how Global Citizenship Education (GCE) can be effectively integrated into adult education through the lens of transformative learning, while foregrounding the principles of intersectionality and equity. It probes how adults can develop global awareness, intercultural competence, and ethical responsibility; and critically, how these approaches can include marginalized perspectives and redress systemic inequity.

Another notable example comes from Spark (2024), who explored transformative dialogue practices in a South African student's philosophy of religion course. The study showed how dialogical encounters between students from Christian, Muslim, atheist, and indigenous spiritual backgrounds led to mutual understanding and deconstruction of simplistic narratives. The authors emphasize that the dialogical process itself; rooted in trust, listening, and vulnerability; was transformative, even when consensus was not achieved. Below is a summary of key studies that represent this theme:

Table 2: Selected Studies on Intercultural Competence and Dialogue

Author(s) & Year	Main Focus	Methodology	Key Findings
Stewart (2022)	Comparative literature and cultural empathy	Mixed-Methods	Grow in intercultural competence; both cognitively (knowledge) and affectively (attitudes).
Shoiria (2025)	Applying transformative learning to adult GCE	Theoretical synthesis	Emphasizes inclusive, reflective, and equity-driven adult GCE
Spark (2024)	Philosophy of religion in post-apartheid South Africa	Reflective Journals & Dialogue Analysis	Promoted mutual respect across religious divides
Friesen (2023)	Rural perspectives in ethics courses	Discourse Analysis	Highlighted the role of cultural humility in ethical reasoning

Ganesan & Morales (2024)	Multilingual storytelling in cultural studies	Narrative Inquiry	Multilingual texts enabled deeper engagement with cultural identity issues
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Across these studies, several pedagogical strategies emerged as particularly effective in fostering intercultural transformation: There are; reflective journaling: Used to encourage internal dialogue and track perspective shifts over time; dialogical classrooms: Structured to promote active listening, respectful disagreement, and collaborative inquiry; case-based learning: Employing real-world intercultural conflicts to illustrate abstract concepts; and multilingual and multimodal materials: Allowing learners to access cultural knowledge through diverse languages and media.

Importantly, the literature suggests that intercultural competence cannot be taught solely through content delivery. Rather, it must be cultivated through intentional, reflective, and dialogical pedagogy that aligns with the stages of transformative learning: encountering disorienting dilemmas, engaging in critical reflection, and integrating new perspectives into personal meaning schemes.

A recurring finding is the importance of emotional safety and trust in enabling transformative intercultural encounters. Instructors who created environments that honoured vulnerability and curiosity were more successful in facilitating perspective transformation. Conversely, classrooms that emphasized debate over dialogue or failed to acknowledge power dynamics often resulted in defensive reactions or superficial engagement.

In terms of critique, some scholars argue that Mezirow's theory, while useful, requires further adaptation to non-Western contexts. For instance, Friesen (2023) note that rational discourse can be culturally limiting when applied in collectivist societies where harmony, silence, or indirect communication are valued. These authors advocate for a culturally expanded version of transformative learning that embraces multiple epistemologies and communicative styles.

Despite such critiques, the majority of reviewed studies find Mezirow's framework to be a highly adaptable tool for promoting intercultural awareness and competency. Several papers recommend that institutions institutionalize transformative learning approaches across the curriculum, especially in first-year or general education humanities courses where foundational worldviews are still forming.

Reflexivity and Personal Growth

The third prominent theme emerging from the literature is the role of transformative learning in fostering personal growth through reflexivity. Reflexivity can be defined as the conscious process of examining one's assumptions, values, and identity; forms the core of Mezirow's transformative learning theory. While social justice and intercultural competence reflect outward-oriented transformations, reflexivity is inward-facing, enabling students to better understand the origins of their beliefs, the forces that shape them, and the capacity to reframe their worldview. In the humanities, this kind of introspective inquiry is not only appropriate but essential, given the disciplines' focus on critical thinking, meaning-making, and the human condition.

Multiple studies illustrate how reflective processes such as journaling, autobiographical writing, and facilitated discussion circles serve as effective mechanisms to prompt deep internal transformation. For example, Lees et al. (2022) analyzed the impact of structured personal journals in an ethics course. Students were asked to write weekly reflections responding to questions such as, “What moral assumptions are you challenging this week?” or “How have your views shifted after this reading?” The researchers observed that over a semester, students moved from superficial responses to complex self-questioning, culminating in significant shifts in how they viewed themselves and others.

Similarly, Todorova et al. (2021) examined the use of reflective essays in a literature and identity course taught to undergraduate students. The researchers employed a rubric based on Mezirow’s ten phases of perspective transformation to evaluate the essays. Their findings revealed that most students moved beyond simple emotional reactions to texts and began articulating how specific moments in the course changed their views on gender, class, and personal agency. Students often cited “aha” moments in which a particular poem, narrative, or class discussion caused a rupture in previously held assumptions.

In another study, Petrovic et al. (2022) explored how personal storytelling workshops embedded in a cultural studies curriculum facilitated deep introspection. Students were asked to craft and share narratives from their lived experiences tied to identity, loss, migration, or marginalization. Peer feedback and dialogue were then structured using Mezirow’s critical reflection framework. This dual-layered approach; storytelling and communal interpretation; was particularly effective for students from minoritized backgrounds, who reported that the process validated their experiences while also challenging internalized oppression. Next is a summary of key studies that illustrate this theme:

Table 3: Selected Studies on Reflexivity and Personal Growth

Author(s) & Year	Main Focus	Methodology	Key Findings
Lees et al. (2022)	Reflective journaling in ethics education	Content Analysis of Journals	Identified stages of perspective transformation through sustained reflection
Kaowiwattanakul (2020)	Literature and identity-based critical essays	Rubric-Based Essay Analysis	Revealed transformation through student recognition of internalized norms
Petrovic et al. (2022)	Transformative Storytelling Technique to create empowering caregiver stories	Thematic Analysis	Crafted a fictional narrative through Transformative Storytelling Technique
Cedar et al. (2021)	Philosophy-based dialogical self-inquiry	Dialogical Learning Model	Promoted moral reasoning and personal authenticity
Atehortúa (2020)	Decolonizing intersectionality teaching via a pragmatic toolkit	Conceptual Design & Gender Studies course	Toolkit fosters epistemic disobedience, inclusive dialogue, emotional engagement, and student reflections

Across these studies, a few core principles emerge regarding how reflexivity contributes to transformative learning. Firstly, is time and repetition matter; short-term reflection often produces superficial insights, whereas sustained reflection across weeks or semesters fosters deeper shifts. Secondly, are safe learning environments; students must feel emotionally safe to explore vulnerable or controversial aspects of themselves. Thirdly, is instructor modelling; instructors who share their own reflective processes can normalize vulnerability and support trust-building. Lastly, are multiple modalities: writing, speaking, silence, and even art can all be legitimate modes of self-reflection, especially for students from non-western or oral traditions.

While the outcomes of reflexivity are often positive, some scholars caution against assuming that transformation is always linear or guaranteed. For instance, Cedar et al. (2021) found that some students resisted transformation due to fear of social rejection, identity destabilization, or discomfort with ambiguity. Others engaged in what the authors called “pseudo-reflection”; where they mimicked reflective language without truly interrogating their assumptions. This suggests that while Mezirow’s model provides a valuable scaffold, its success depends heavily on facilitation, cultural context, and student readiness.

Another issue raised in the literature is the tension between intellectual and emotional reflexivity. Some students show cognitive shifts in how they view a concept but remain emotionally attached to old assumptions. Instructors noted that transformation often required not just new insights but affective integration; a challenge that goes beyond traditional academic assessment. Scholars such as Atehortúa (2020) proposes a toolkit that helps educators revamp how intersectionality is taught; not as a neutral buzzword, but as a radical, inclusive, and justice-driven practice.

Finally, the reviewed literature strongly suggests that reflexivity should be framed as a lifelong process rather than a one-time event. While Mezirow’s original model outlined a series of sequential phases, many contemporary scholars argue that transformation is recursive and non-linear. Students may experience partial transformations, regress, or revisit earlier stages as they encounter new dilemmas. Educators are thus encouraged to emphasize resilience, curiosity, and openness as markers of growth, rather than finality.

In sum, reflexivity and personal growth remain foundational to transformative learning in the humanities. When facilitated with care and contextual sensitivity, these processes empower students to question the narratives they live by, reimagine their roles in the world, and move toward more authentic and ethical self-understanding. This theme reinforces the enduring relevance of Mezirow’s theory, particularly in educational spaces that prioritize meaning-making, empathy, and the moral dimensions of knowledge.

Discussion

The purpose of this discussion is to synthesize the findings presented in the previous section and reflect on the broader implications of applying Mezirow’s transformative learning theory in contemporary humanities education. This section addresses key insights emerging from the thematic categories; social justice and ethics, intercultural competence, and reflexivity; while critically engaging with the strengths, limitations, and evolving nature of Mezirow’s framework. It also considers how the application of transformative learning intersects with present-day socio-political realities and offers guidance for future research and pedagogical practice.

The Humanities as a Site for Transformation

The humanities are uniquely positioned as a domain where transformative learning can thrive. As disciplines grounded in the exploration of meaning, morality, aesthetics, identity, and power, they naturally invite learners into complex dialogues about the human condition. Unlike instrumental education, which tends to prioritize efficiency and technical knowledge, the humanities emphasize deep reflection, interpretive nuance, and ethical complexity; qualities that align directly with Mezirow's transformational model.

This review has demonstrated that Mezirow's theory is widely adopted in humanities curricula not merely as a conceptual lens but as a practical framework for designing learning experiences that challenge assumptions and expand perspectives. Whether through literature, philosophy, cultural studies, or ethics, instructors are creating "disorienting dilemmas" that prompt students to interrogate their worldviews, reconsider inherited beliefs, and reconstruct their identities. The humanities, then, do not just convey knowledge; they actively mediate transformation.

Integration of Critical Theories

One of the most compelling developments in the reviewed literature is the integration of Mezirow's framework with critical theories, including feminism, decolonial thought, critical race theory, and post-structuralism. While Mezirow emphasized rational discourse as the primary mechanism for transformation, these more recent contributions argue that transformation is also deeply emotional, embodied, and relational.

For example, studies on social justice education revealed that transformative learning becomes more impactful when combined with critical pedagogy. Instructors who use texts from marginalized voices or encourage experiential learning (e.g., activism, community engagement) often generate richer and more sustained transformation. These integrations push Mezirow's theory beyond its original parameters, highlighting that transformation is not solely cognitive but affective, cultural, and systemic.

This development is significant because it addresses one of the most persistent critiques of Mezirow's theory; its Western, individualistic, and rationalist orientation. By incorporating diverse epistemologies and pedagogies, educators are localizing transformative learning to fit varied cultural, spiritual, and political contexts. This evolution is not a rejection of Mezirow but a necessary expansion that strengthens the theory's relevance across global and intersectional settings.

Pedagogical Innovation and Practice

From a pedagogical perspective, the studies reviewed reveal a broad array of innovative practices that operationalize Mezirow's theory in the classroom. Reflective journaling, narrative inquiry, autobiographical writing, peer-led dialogue, multilingual storytelling, and arts-based projects all serve as tools to elicit critical self-awareness and perspective shifts. These methods demonstrate that transformative learning is not bound to one form; it is adaptable and multifaceted, capable of manifesting through diverse mediums and activities.

Moreover, the role of the educator emerges as central in facilitating transformative experiences. Effective facilitators are those who create emotionally safe and intellectually challenging environments. They model vulnerability, embrace dialogical openness, and provide scaffolding for students to reflect deeply. Transformation does not happen in a vacuum; it requires

intentional design, sustained support, and recognition of power dynamics within learning spaces.

However, several challenges remain. Some educators struggle to assess transformation in reliable and ethical ways. Unlike content knowledge, transformation is internal, fluid, and sometimes invisible. Overemphasis on assessment can even inhibit authentic reflection, as students may perform rather than experience transformation. Others note the emotional risks involved in transformative learning; particularly when addressing trauma, oppression, or identity shifts; and call for trauma-informed pedagogies that acknowledge students' vulnerabilities and lived experiences.

Cultural Sensitivity and Global Application

The review also brings attention to the cultural specificity of transformative learning processes. While Mezirow's stages of transformation are widely applicable, the ways in which learners experience and express transformation vary greatly depending on their cultural, linguistic, and spiritual backgrounds.

In collectivist societies, for instance, transformation may be less about individual autonomy and more about harmonizing with the group or community. In such settings, silent reflection, deference to tradition, or indirect communication may be more effective than verbal critique. This suggests that Mezirow's emphasis on critical discourse must be recalibrated to respect different modes of meaning-making.

Several scholars advocate for transcultural adaptations of transformative learning theory. These include incorporating non-Western philosophies (e.g., Ubuntu, Taoism, Indigenous epistemologies), expanding the notion of "self" to include relational identities, and recognizing the spiritual or existential dimensions of transformation. These adaptations not only enhance the inclusivity of the theory but also affirm that transformation is a global human experience; albeit expressed in culturally situated ways.

Limitations in Current Scholarship

Despite the richness of the reviewed literature, several gaps and limitations persist:

1. Over-Reliance on Qualitative Data

While qualitative methods capture depth and nuance, the field would benefit from more mixed-methods and longitudinal studies that track the sustainability of transformation over time.

2. Underrepresentation of Non-Western Voices

Most of the reviewed literature originates from the global north. more research is needed from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and indigenous communities to ensure that the global landscape of transformation is represented.

3. Conceptual Ambiguity

Terms like "transformation," "reflexivity," and "critical reflection" are often used interchangeably or without clear operational definitions. this makes comparison and synthesis across studies difficult and calls for more conceptual clarity.

4. Assessment Challenges

As mentioned earlier, measuring transformation remains problematic. there is a need for ethically sound and methodologically robust tools that can assess depth of change without compromising the learner's agency or dignity.

Future Directions

Looking ahead, several recommendations can guide future scholarship and practice:

1. Integrative Frameworks

Combine Mezirow's theory with other models of learning (e.g., experiential, contemplative, relational) to capture the complexity of human development.

2. Policy-Level Engagement

Encourage educational institutions to formally adopt transformative learning goals within curricula, assessment strategies, and faculty development programs.

3. Research Diversity

Foster transnational, interdisciplinary, and participatory research that centres marginalized voices and local knowledges.

4. Pedagogical Training

Develop faculty training programs that equip instructors with the skills, tools, and emotional literacy needed to facilitate transformation ethically and effectively.

Conclusion

This systematic review set out to explore the application, evolution, and critique of Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory within humanities education from 2020 to 2025. Through the analysis of 35 peer-reviewed studies sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, the review identified three dominant thematic areas where Mezirow's framework was most prominently applied: (1) social justice and ethical discourse, (2) intercultural competence and dialogue, and (3) reflexivity and personal growth. Each theme reflects a distinct yet interconnected dimension of transformation and demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Mezirow's work in addressing the complex social and educational challenges of the 21st century.

The findings affirm that Mezirow's theory remains a powerful tool for facilitating deep learning and personal transformation within the humanities. In the area of social justice, transformative learning is being used to challenge students' assumptions about power, privilege, and identity. Through critical engagement with marginalized voices, community-based learning, and reflective assignments, students are not only learning about injustice; they are developing the ethical dispositions necessary to respond to it. This aligns with the humanities' long-standing commitment to fostering civic consciousness, ethical inquiry, and social responsibility.

In the realm of intercultural competence, transformative learning enables learners to navigate and transcend cultural boundaries. The reviewed studies demonstrate that students exposed to diverse perspectives through literature, philosophy, or religious studies are more likely to question ethnocentric beliefs and develop the empathy and dialogical openness needed for respectful global citizenship. Mezirow's emphasis on disorienting dilemmas and perspective

transformation is particularly well-suited to such contexts, providing a structured yet flexible model for cultivating intercultural maturity.

The theme of reflexivity highlights transformative learning's capacity to foster self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and authentic identity development. Humanities classrooms offer ideal spaces for such reflection, given their focus on introspection, narrative, and meaning-making. Assignments such as journaling, storytelling, and reflective essays are widely used to guide students through the ten phases of Mezirow's transformation model. In doing so, educators help learners understand themselves not only as knowledge receivers but as dynamic meaning-makers engaged in lifelong personal and intellectual growth.

Yet, while the application of transformative learning in the humanities is both widespread and impactful, this review also uncovers important critiques and calls for theoretical expansion. Scholars increasingly challenge Mezirow's original model for its overemphasis on rationality and individualism, arguing for more inclusive, relational, and culturally situated approaches. Feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous perspectives suggest that transformation is not solely cognitive but also emotional, spiritual, and embodied. These critiques do not reject Mezirow's theory but rather seek to evolve it; acknowledging that learning is deeply contextual and that transformation often occurs in communal, dialogical, and affective spaces.

Another key tension highlighted in the literature is the divide between individual and collective transformation. While Mezirow's theory excels in explaining personal change, it falls short in addressing the structural and systemic dimensions of learning. Educators and scholars increasingly argue that transformative learning must move beyond internal shifts to include action-oriented outcomes; such as activism, community engagement, and policy change. This requires reimagining Mezirow's framework to include public learning, democratic participation, and collective empowerment.

The review also revealed several methodological limitations in current scholarship, including an overreliance on qualitative approaches, underrepresentation of Global South perspectives, and conceptual ambiguity around key terms. To address these issues, future research should prioritize longitudinal and mixed-methods studies, actively include diverse cultural and epistemological voices, and seek greater conceptual clarity and coherence.

In practical terms, educators are encouraged to adopt pedagogies that are reflective, dialogical, and inclusive. This includes cultivating emotionally safe learning environments, modelling vulnerability, integrating diverse voices into curricula, and providing students with opportunities for real-world engagement. Moreover, institutional support is needed to embed transformative learning into curriculum design, faculty development, and assessment strategies. Only then can the humanities truly fulfil their transformative potential; not only in reshaping students' inner lives but in contributing to a more just, empathetic, and critically engaged world.

In conclusion, this review has demonstrated that transformative learning theory; when thoughtfully applied and critically adapted; can serve as a dynamic and responsive framework for humanities education in a rapidly changing world. Mezirow's model continues to offer educators a map for guiding learners through the uncertain terrain of identity, culture, ethics, and social responsibility. At the same time, the evolving nature of this framework reminds us that transformation is not a final destination but an ongoing journey; one that unfolds across time, context, and relationship. As the humanities continue to confront global crises and cultural

complexities, transformative learning will remain an indispensable ally in cultivating thoughtful, reflective, and transformative citizens.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges Universiti Teknologi Malaysia for its support, particularly the School of Human Resource Development and Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. Deepest appreciation is extended to Supervisor Prof. Madya Dr. Mohd Azhar Bin Abd Hamid, Co-supervisor Dr. Yusma Fariza Binti Yasin and also Dr. Junaidah Binti Yusof for their invaluable guidance.

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