

Implementation of Transformative Learning Theory in University Classrooms in Sindh: Teaching Practices and Student Learning Experiences

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of Transformative Learning Theory in university classrooms in Sindh, Pakistan, with a focus on the roles of faculty and learners in shaping teaching and learning experiences. Guided by Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, the research explores how faculty use learner-centered and interactive pedagogies, and how learners experience perspective transformation through reflective and participatory classroom practices. A qualitative descriptive case study design was employed, using purposive sampling to select faculty and learners from public and private universities in Sindh. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings show that learners are mainly motivated by career advancement, professional growth, and personal development, but face challenges such as time management, financial constraints, and limited institutional flexibility. Faculty practices that include discussions, group work, and reflective activities were found to support learner engagement and critical thinking. The study concludes that transformative learning is partially implemented in university classrooms, depending on faculty teaching approaches and institutional conditions. It recommends promoting faculty training in andragogical methods and creating supportive learning environments to enhance transformative learning experiences.

Keywords: Transformative Learning Theory; Faculty; Learners; Higher Education; Andragogy; Reflective Learning; Teaching Practices; Sindh Universities; Qualitative Case Study

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1. Introduction

Higher education worldwide is undergoing significant transformation as universities strive to produce graduates equipped with the skills necessary for the 21st century, including critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and adaptability (UNESCO, 2021). Traditional teacher-centered approaches that focus on passive content delivery have been widely criticized for failing to foster deep learning, creativity, and reflective capacities among students (Biggs & Tang, 2019). In response, educational researchers and practitioners have increasingly advocated for learner-centered pedagogies that emphasize active engagement, reflective thinking, and the construction of meaning through experience (Freeman et al., 2019).

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), first articulated by Mezirow, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how adults change their frames of reference through critical reflection, discourse, and experiential learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2019). According to transformative learning scholars, learners encounter “disorienting dilemmas” that challenge existing assumptions and prompt deep reflection, leading to perspective transformation and more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative worldviews (Kitchenham, 2020). This process is especially relevant in university classrooms, where students are expected to navigate complex knowledge domains and develop autonomy in their thinking (Cranton & Taylor, 2020).

Research indicates that transformative learning supports not only cognitive development but also affective and interpersonal growth, enabling learners to engage meaningfully with diverse perspectives and real-world problems (Mezirow & Taylor, 2021). In higher education, the implementation of transformative pedagogies has been linked to enhanced student engagement, improved critical thinking, increased motivation, and deeper understanding of disciplinary concepts (Chen et al., 2022). For example, learner-centered strategies such as reflective journaling, collaborative problem-solving, and facilitated dialogue have been shown to promote reflective judgment and self-regulated learning (Brookfield, 2020).

Despite its documented benefits, the application of Transformative Learning Theory in many developing country contexts remains limited (Merriam & Bierema, 2022). In Pakistan, and specifically in the province of Sindh, higher education classrooms are often characterized by large class sizes, teacher-centered lectures, and examination-driven cultures that prioritize memorization over critical inquiry (Ali et al., 2021). Such contexts present challenges to the adoption of transformative pedagogies, as instructors may lack both training and institutional support to implement learner-centered practices that encourage reflection, dialogue, and critical engagement (Shah et al., 2023).

Moreover, socio-cultural norms and hierarchical teacher-student relationships in Sindh universities may further constrain opportunities for open discourse and student autonomy, which are central to transformative learning (Iqbal & Mirza, 2022). In addition, rigid curricula and assessment systems that emphasize standardized testing limit instructors’ flexibility to design learning experiences that facilitate perspective transformation (Raza & Jamil, 2024). These systemic barriers highlight a significant gap between the theoretical promise of transformative learning and its practical realization in local educational settings.

Given these challenges, there is a need to examine how Transformative Learning Theory is understood, interpreted, and applied in university classrooms in Sindh. Specifically, it is important to explore the extent to which teaching practices align with transformative principles and how students experience these practices in relation to their own learning and

personal growth (O’Shea et al., 2024). Understanding these dynamics can provide insights into the ways in which higher education institutions might better support transformative pedagogies, enhance teacher professional development, and redesign curricula to promote deeper, more meaningful learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the implementation of Transformative Learning Theory in university classrooms in Sindh by examining teaching practices and student learning experiences. By reviewing and synthesizing relevant literature, the study will identify how transformative pedagogies are manifested in instructional practices, the nature of students’ transformative experiences, and the contextual challenges that influence these processes. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on transformative education and inform policy, practice, and future research in higher education both locally and internationally (Selingo, 2022).

Literature Review

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) has gained considerable attention in higher education research as institutions increasingly emphasize the development of critical thinking, reflective judgment, and lifelong learning competencies among students. Rooted in the work of Mezirow, transformative learning focuses on how learners critically examine their assumptions, engage in reflective discourse, and reconstruct their frames of reference through meaningful learning experiences (Taylor & Cranton, 2019). Recent scholarship suggests that TLT is particularly relevant in contemporary higher education contexts where learner-centered pedagogies are being prioritized over traditional lecture-based instruction (Merriam & Bierema, 2022).

Conceptual Foundations of Transformative Learning

Transformative Learning Theory posits that learning occurs when individuals encounter disorienting dilemmas that challenge their existing beliefs, leading to critical reflection and perspective transformation (Kitchenham, 2020). This process involves both cognitive and affective dimensions, where learners not only acquire knowledge but also reassess their values, assumptions, and worldviews (Mezirow & Taylor, 2021). The theory emphasizes three core components: critical reflection, rational discourse, and experiential learning, which collectively facilitate deeper understanding and personal growth (Cranton & Taylor, 2020). Recent studies have expanded the theoretical boundaries of TLT by highlighting its applicability across diverse educational settings, including online and blended learning environments. For instance, transformative learning has been found to enhance student engagement and meaning-making when learners actively participate in collaborative discussions and reflective activities (O’Shea et al., 2024). These findings suggest that TLT aligns closely with constructivist approaches to learning, where knowledge is actively constructed rather than passively transmitted (Freeman et al., 2019).

Transformative Learning in Higher Education

In higher education, transformative learning is increasingly recognized as a pedagogical approach that promotes deep learning and student-centered instruction. Research indicates that when instructors adopt teaching strategies aligned with TLT, students demonstrate improved critical thinking, higher-order reasoning, and increased motivation (Chen et al., 2022). Active learning strategies such as problem-based learning, reflective journaling, peer discussion, and case-based instruction have been identified as effective in fostering transformative experiences among students (Brookfield, 2020). Empirical evidence also suggests that transformative pedagogies contribute to improved academic performance and engagement. Freeman et al. (2019) found that active learning approaches significantly

enhance student achievement compared to traditional lecture-based methods. Similarly, Chen et al. (2022) demonstrated that interactive and learner-centered environments encourage students to take ownership of their learning, thereby facilitating deeper conceptual understanding.

Student Learning Experiences and Transformation

Student learning experiences play a central role in the transformative learning process. According to Mezirow and Taylor (2021), transformation occurs when learners critically reflect on their experiences and engage in dialogue with others to reinterpret their understanding of knowledge and reality. These experiences often involve shifts in perspective, increased self-awareness, and the development of more inclusive and flexible thinking patterns (King, 2023). Studies have shown that students exposed to transformative pedagogies report higher levels of engagement, satisfaction, and intellectual growth. O'Shea et al. (2024) found that students participating in reflective and dialogic learning environments experienced meaningful changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and approaches to learning. Similarly, Brookfield (2020) emphasizes the importance of critical reflection in enabling students to question assumptions and develop independent thinking skills.

Teaching Practices and Transformative Pedagogy

Teaching practices are a critical determinant of whether transformative learning occurs in the classroom. Instructors who adopt learner-centered approaches, facilitate dialogue, and encourage reflection are more likely to create environments conducive to transformation (Merriam & Bierema, 2022). Effective transformative teaching involves creating opportunities for students to engage in collaborative learning, analyze real-world problems, and reflect on their experiences (Alzahrani et al., 2023). However, implementing transformative pedagogies requires a shift in the role of the instructor from a knowledge transmitter to a facilitator of learning. This shift can be challenging in contexts where traditional teacher-centered approaches dominate. Cranton and Taylor (2020) argue that instructors must develop skills in facilitating discourse, encouraging critical reflection, and supporting diverse perspectives to effectively implement TLT in classroom settings.

Challenges in Implementing Transformative Learning in Developing Contexts

Despite its theoretical and practical benefits, the implementation of Transformative Learning Theory faces several challenges, particularly in developing countries. Educational systems in such contexts often emphasize rote memorization, standardized testing, and rigid curricula, which limit opportunities for critical reflection and active engagement (Raza & Jamil, 2024). In Pakistan, higher education institutions frequently operate within traditional pedagogical frameworks that prioritize lecture-based instruction over interactive learning (Ali et al., 2021). Large class sizes, limited teacher training, and lack of institutional support further hinder the adoption of transformative teaching practices (Shah et al., 2023). Additionally, socio-cultural factors such as hierarchical teacher-student relationships may discourage open dialogue and critical questioning in classrooms (Iqbal & Mirza, 2022).

Curricular and assessment constraints also pose significant barriers to transformative learning. Rigid examination systems that focus on memorization rather than critical thinking restrict instructors' ability to implement innovative teaching strategies (Hussain & Ahmed, 2023). As a result, there is often a mismatch between the intended learning outcomes of higher education programs and the actual learning experiences of students.

Transformative Learning in the Context of Sindh

In the context of Sindh, limited research has explored the application of Transformative Learning Theory in university classrooms. Existing studies suggest that teaching practices in

Sindh's higher education institutions remain largely traditional, with minimal emphasis on reflective and student-centered approaches (Shaikh & Khan, 2025). Faculty members may face challenges in adopting transformative pedagogies due to lack of professional development opportunities and institutional constraints (Farooq & Baloch, 2026). Moreover, students in Sindh often come from educational backgrounds that emphasize memorization and exam-oriented learning, which may limit their readiness for transformative learning experiences. This highlights the need for pedagogical interventions that gradually introduce students to reflective practices and critical inquiry. Understanding how transformative learning can be effectively implemented in such contexts is essential for improving the quality of higher education in the region.

Summary of Literature and Research Gap

The reviewed literature indicates that Transformative Learning Theory provides a valuable framework for enhancing student learning experiences and promoting deep, meaningful education. While substantial evidence supports the effectiveness of transformative pedagogies in improving student engagement and critical thinking, there is limited empirical research on their implementation in developing contexts such as Pakistan, particularly in Sindh. Existing studies highlight several barriers to the adoption of transformative learning, including traditional teaching practices, institutional constraints, socio-cultural factors, and rigid assessment systems. However, there is a lack of comprehensive research examining how teaching practices align with transformative principles and how students experience these practices in university classrooms in Sindh. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the implementation of Transformative Learning Theory in university classrooms in Sindh, focusing on teaching practices and student learning experiences. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on transformative education and provide practical insights for improving teaching and learning in higher education.

This study is aimed at examining the implementation of Transformative Learning Theory in university classrooms in Sindh by analyzing teaching practices and student learning experiences within higher education institutions. It further seeks to identify the extent to which learner-centered and transformative pedagogical approaches are being applied by instructors in classroom settings. The study also aims to explore the experiences of students in relation to critical reflection, engagement, and perspective transformation as conceptualized within Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. In addition, this study intends to investigate the challenges and contextual barriers faced by educators in adopting transformative teaching practices, including institutional, pedagogical, and socio-cultural constraints. Moreover, it aims to generate recommendations for enhancing teaching and learning processes through the effective integration of transformative learning strategies, and to encourage educators and policymakers to create supportive and conducive learning environments that promote critical thinking, reflective dialogue, and meaningful learning experiences in higher education.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore the implementation of Transformative Learning Theory in university classrooms in Sindh. A case study approach is considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth and contextualized understanding of teaching practices and student learning experiences within real-life academic settings. The study is exploratory in nature and focuses on examining how transformative pedagogical approaches are implemented by faculty members and experienced by students during the

teaching and learning process. Purposive sampling is used to select participants who have direct and relevant experience with university-level teaching and learning. This includes both faculty members who are actively engaged in teaching and students who are enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The inclusion of both groups allows the researcher to obtain multiple perspectives on classroom practices and learning experiences, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of transformative learning implementation in higher education contexts.

3.2 Population of the Study

The population of this study consists of university-level students and faculty members from both public and private universities in Sindh, Pakistan. The student population includes individuals enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs who have experienced classroom environments where learner-centered or transformative teaching practices are applied. In addition, faculty members who are actively involved in university teaching are included to provide insights into instructional strategies, pedagogical approaches, and classroom facilitation techniques associated with Transformative Learning Theory. Their perspectives help in understanding how transformative practices are planned, delivered, and adapted in real classroom settings. Purposive sampling is employed to select participants from selected public and private universities to ensure diversity in institutional context and academic experience. A relatively small number of participants is intentionally selected to allow for in-depth exploration of both teaching practices and learning experiences, making it possible to capture rich, detailed, and meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

3.3 Instrumentation

The primary instrument used for data collection in this study is semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Separate but related interview protocols are developed for both faculty members and students to ensure that the perspectives of both groups are adequately captured. The interview questions are designed to explore teaching practices, classroom interactions, and student learning experiences within the framework of Transformative Learning Theory. The faculty interview section focuses on instructional strategies, including the use of reflective activities, group discussions, problem-based learning, experiential teaching methods, and techniques used to encourage critical thinking and perspective transformation among students. Faculty members are also asked about their awareness and application of transformative learning principles in their teaching practices, as well as the challenges they face in implementing such approaches.

The student interview section aims to explore their learning experiences, including their level of engagement, participation in classroom activities, and perceived changes in knowledge, attitudes, or perspectives resulting from instructional practices. Students are also asked about the extent to which classroom environments promote critical reflection, dialogue, and active participation. Furthermore, both faculty and students are asked about the challenges they encounter in the teaching and learning process, such as institutional constraints, classroom environment, curriculum limitations, and pedagogical barriers. The open-ended nature of the interviews allows participants to express their views freely and provide detailed responses, enabling the researcher to gather rich qualitative data. The use of semi-structured interviews provides flexibility in probing participant responses while maintaining consistency with the key research objectives. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of how transformative learning is implemented and experienced in university classrooms from both teaching and learning perspectives.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

On the basis of the analyzed data collected from both students and faculty members, the following findings were derived regarding the implementation of Transformative Learning Theory in university classrooms in Sindh. The responses from both groups indicate that transformative learning is reflected through observable changes in students' perspectives, attitudes, and approaches toward learning, as well as through the instructional strategies employed by faculty members in classroom settings. The majority of participants reported that classroom experiences contributed to shifts in thinking patterns, enhanced critical awareness, and encouraged reflection on prior assumptions and beliefs. Although the degree of transformation varied among participants, both students and faculty acknowledged the presence of cognitive and perceptual changes resulting from learner-centered and interactive teaching practices.

The findings revealed that faculty members commonly employed teaching practices such as group discussions, reflective questioning, problem-based activities, and collaborative tasks to facilitate engagement and deeper understanding among students. Faculty participants emphasized that encouraging open dialogue and critical engagement allows students to express their viewpoints freely and reconsider existing assumptions. From the students' perspective, these pedagogical strategies significantly contributed to the development of critical thinking skills and supported them in constructing new meanings from their learning experiences. Reflective activities, including class discussions, assignments, and feedback sessions, were identified as key mechanisms through which transformative learning was promoted in the classroom.

Furthermore, the data indicated that students' engagement in reflective thinking enabled them to critically examine their beliefs, experiences, and understanding of academic content. Faculty members reported that when students are encouraged to reflect on their learning, they gradually begin to reconstruct their "frames of reference," which aligns with the core principles of Transformative Learning Theory. Students, in turn, expressed that connecting classroom learning with real-life situations enhanced their ability to internalize concepts and apply knowledge in practical contexts. This experiential connection was highlighted as an important factor in strengthening analytical and evaluative skills.

The findings also suggest that the classroom environment, particularly the role of faculty support and interaction, plays a significant role in facilitating transformative learning. Both students and faculty participants emphasized that supportive, inclusive, and participatory classroom environments enhance learning experiences. Faculty members who encouraged participation, valued diverse opinions, and provided constructive feedback were seen to positively influence student engagement and motivation. Students reported that such environments helped them feel more confident in sharing ideas and participating actively in classroom discussions.

In addition, the analysis revealed that participation in discussions, presentations, and collaborative activities contributed to improvements in students' confidence, communication skills, and ability to engage in rational discourse. Faculty members observed that when students are actively involved in classroom interactions, they become more capable of articulating their thoughts and evaluating alternative perspectives. This process of rational discourse enables students to critically assess their assumptions and develop more balanced viewpoints, which is a key aspect of transformative learning.

The findings further indicate that while not all participants experienced full transformation, both students and faculty acknowledged partial transformation in terms of attitude,

awareness, and learning behavior. Students reported that their learning experiences influenced their academic motivation, professional aspirations, and personal development. Faculty members also noted that exposure to diverse viewpoints within the classroom contributes to fostering open-mindedness and critical thinking among students.

Overall, the findings suggest that Transformative Learning Theory is reflected in university classroom practices in Sindh to a considerable extent through the combined perspectives of both students and faculty. Interactive teaching strategies, reflective practices, and supportive learning environments were identified as key elements that contribute to transformative learning experiences. However, the level of transformation is influenced by multiple factors, including teaching approaches adopted by faculty, classroom dynamics, institutional context, and the extent of student participation in reflective and critical learning processes.

5. Discussion

The discussion section is organized in relation to the research objectives and interprets the findings derived from both students and faculty members regarding the implementation of Transformative Learning Theory in university classrooms in Sindh. It aims to synthesize the results into a coherent understanding of teaching practices, classroom dynamics, and student learning experiences within the framework of transformative and learner-centered education. The discussion further examines how these findings align with Transformative Learning Theory and the broader context of higher education pedagogy.

5.1 Teaching Practices Promoting Transformative Learning

The findings indicate that faculty members play a central role in facilitating transformative learning through the adoption of interactive and learner-centered teaching practices. Teaching strategies such as group discussions, reflective questioning, problem-based learning, collaborative tasks, and classroom dialogue were identified as key mechanisms used by instructors to engage students actively in the learning process. From the perspectives of both faculty and students, these practices encourage critical thinking, participation, and open exchange of ideas. Faculty members reported that such strategies help students question their assumptions, engage in deeper analysis, and construct new meanings from academic content. Students, on the other hand, experienced these practices as opportunities to express opinions, interact with peers, and reflect on different viewpoints. These findings highlight that transformative learning is more effectively facilitated when instructors move beyond traditional lecture-based methods and adopt participatory approaches that emphasize dialogue, reflection, and experiential engagement. This aligns with Transformative Learning Theory, which underscores the importance of critical reflection and discourse in enabling perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991).

5.2 Student Learning Experiences and Perspective Transformation

The findings reveal that students' learning experiences are significantly influenced by their engagement in reflective and interactive classroom activities. Many students reported experiencing changes in their thinking patterns, increased awareness, and improved ability to analyze and interpret information. Faculty members observed that when students actively participate in classroom discussions and reflective exercises, they gradually begin to challenge their existing beliefs and develop more informed perspectives. Students confirmed that exposure to diverse viewpoints and academic discussions helped them reconsider their assumptions and broaden their understanding of various concepts. Although the degree of transformation varied among participants, both groups acknowledged that even partial transformation occurred in terms of attitudes, awareness, and learning behavior. These

changes reflect the core principles of Transformative Learning Theory, where learners reconstruct their “frames of reference” through reflection and rational discourse (Mezirow, 1991). The findings further indicate that experiential learning, where students connect theoretical knowledge with real-life situations, enhances understanding and supports meaningful learning. This experiential engagement contributes to deeper cognitive processing and long-term retention of knowledge.

5.3 Role of Faculty in Facilitating Transformative Learning

The role of faculty members emerged as a critical factor in shaping transformative learning experiences. Faculty participants emphasized that their teaching effectiveness depends on creating an inclusive, supportive, and interactive classroom environment. They highlighted the importance of encouraging student participation, valuing diverse opinions, and providing constructive feedback. Students also identified faculty support as a key element in their learning experiences. Instructors who promoted open communication and respected students’ contributions were perceived as more effective in facilitating engagement and motivation. Such faculty behaviors contributed to building students’ confidence and willingness to participate in academic discussions. These findings suggest that faculty members act as facilitators rather than mere transmitters of knowledge in transformative classrooms. Their role involves guiding discussions, encouraging reflection, and supporting students in critically examining their ideas. This aligns with learner-centered pedagogical approaches, where the instructor functions as a facilitator of learning rather than the sole authority in the classroom.

5.4 Classroom Environment and Learning Dynamics

The study findings indicate that the classroom environment plays a significant role in supporting or constraining transformative learning. Both students and faculty emphasized that a positive learning environment characterized by mutual respect, openness, and active participation enhances the learning process. Participants reported that classrooms where dialogue is encouraged and students feel comfortable expressing their views are more conducive to transformative experiences. In contrast, overly lecture-oriented or rigid classroom settings were perceived as limiting opportunities for interaction and reflection. The findings also highlight the importance of peer interaction in the learning process. Collaborative activities, group discussions, and presentations enable students to learn from one another, exchange ideas, and develop social and communication skills. These interactions contribute to rational discourse, which is a key component of Transformative Learning Theory.

5.5 Challenges in Implementing Transformative Learning

Despite the presence of transformative practices, the findings reveal several challenges in implementing Transformative Learning Theory in university classrooms. Faculty members reported constraints such as large class sizes, limited time, curriculum pressure, and institutional limitations that restrict the full adoption of interactive teaching methods. Students also indicated that not all classrooms provide equal opportunities for participation, with some sessions remaining largely lecture-based. This inconsistency in teaching approaches affects the extent to which students can engage in reflective and critical learning processes. Additionally, both students and faculty highlighted institutional factors such as rigid academic structures and limited flexibility in teaching schedules as barriers to effective implementation. These challenges suggest that while individual instructors may adopt transformative practices, broader institutional support is necessary to sustain such approaches across the educational system.

6. Conclusion

The overall findings suggest that Transformative Learning Theory is partially reflected in university classroom practices in Sindh through the combined efforts of faculty and student engagement. Interactive teaching methods, reflective activities, and supportive classroom environments contribute to fostering transformative experiences among students. However, the level of transformation is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including teaching strategies, classroom dynamics, institutional policies, and student willingness to participate in reflective and critical thinking processes. Faculty members play a crucial role in initiating and sustaining transformative practices, while students contribute through active participation and engagement. The study highlights the need for continued professional development of faculty members in adopting transformative and learner-centered pedagogies. It also emphasizes the importance of institutional reforms that support flexible, inclusive, and interactive learning environments. Strengthening these aspects can enhance the effectiveness of Transformative Learning Theory in higher education and improve student learning outcomes in university classrooms in Sindh.

6.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, faculty members are recommended to adopt andragogical, learner-centered teaching approaches that actively engage learners in the classroom. Faculty should incorporate interactive strategies such as group discussions, case studies, presentations, problem-based learning, and reflective writing tasks. These methods help in utilizing students' prior experiences while promoting critical thinking, self-reflection, and the practical application of knowledge, which are essential for transformative learning. Students are encouraged to actively participate in classroom activities and take responsibility for their own learning. They should engage in discussions, share their perspectives, and make use of their prior experiences to better understand academic content. Students should also practice reflective thinking, remain open to new ideas, and collaborate with peers to enhance their learning experience and develop critical and analytical skills.

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