

## **TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH (TER): A CONCEPT PAPER**

Kathmandu University School of Education (KUSEOD), Nepal, hosted the 1st International Conference on Transformative Education Research and Sustainable Development (TERSD 2016) from 21-23 October, 2016, in collaboration with co-organizer, Murdoch University School of Education, Australia. Our conference brought together a great variety of practices, experiences and scholarly discussions on transformative education and research. In doing so, it contributed to expanding awareness of our situatedness in the world; and created a harmonious space for bringing together wisdom traditions of East and West. Following the aspirations of TERSD 2016, it was decided that the 2<sup>nd</sup> TERSD Conference will take place in 2018, again hosted in Nepal.

### **Framing the Concept**

This concept paper brings to light integrated meanings on ‘the what’, ‘the why’, ‘the how’, ‘the who’, and ‘the what next’ of transformative education research (TER) by synthesising key ideas shared in TERSD 2016 with other scholarly ideas in this vibrant and emerging knowledge-practice domain. This concept note seeks to define the broad parameters of our transformative research approach in education, taking into consideration what an associated practitioner-research agenda might look like. To achieve this, the paper frames existing TER practices and creates a space to think about future directions for education and educational research, via five topics: (1) TER as a multidimensional approach – the what, (2) TER as a response to a paradigm shift – the why, (3) TER as an arts-based multi-paradigmatic space – the how, (4) TER for emerging leaders in various spheres of the life-world – the who, and (5) TER as imagining the world beyond the given – the what next.

### **TER as a Multidimensional Approach - *the what***

Transformative research in education is a response to the partially conceived mainstream notion of learning/researching as a purely cognitive, analytic process. In its realization that a linear and fragmented approach to education and research is unlikely to address the 21<sup>st</sup> century perplexities of human beings, TER moves away from the narrowly conceived conventional research ideology and its associated methods. Exploring ‘the what’ of TER, however, is not straightforward for it has already moved a short distance ahead, incorporating various possibilities in contemporary educational and social science research. In this regard, ‘the what’ of TER is explored by bringing together considerations of

its classical foundations and the perspectives of keynote speakers in the conference.

To begin, the foundation of TER goes back to Paulo Freire's (1972) concept of *transformative learning* as a socio-cultural approach that is understood primarily in terms of a process of *conscientization* (Freire, 1972). In this deep meaning-making process, the learner/researcher engages dialectically with pre-constructed socio-cultural biases and generates emancipatory values.

David Kolb's (1984) experiential approach to meaning-making set another foundation for TER. Here, *researching as part of learning* is an ongoing process of experiencing the world, where previous (concrete) lived experiences are cautiously integrated so as to formulate abstract concepts and reach conclusions. Such meaning-making through experiencing may eventually lead to new concrete experiences and future directions.

Similarly, Jack Mezirow (1991) understood transformative learning/researching in terms of personal transformation and empowerment. In this approach culturally, yet uncritically embedded, assumptions are questioned. Mezirow's approach to researching is a *psycho-critical* model of meaning-making, where critical observation of lived experiences is vital for personal/professional development of the researcher and the researched.

The *living-education-theory approach* of Jack Whitehead (2008) provides another foundation for transformative educational research. In this approach, self-study researchers explore questions such as: how can I possibly get engaged in my work/profession in more effective ways? This process enables educators/researchers to explore themselves as knowledge-creators. The knowledge created is the practitioner's/ researcher's values-based explanations for improving praxis (Whitehead, 2014).

Many other holistic/participatory approaches (e.g., Ferrer, 2011) are emerging whereby participatory spirituality, integral envisioning, and researching for sustainable reverence, peace, and happiness are taken to be both the means and the ends of education and researching. Such approaches to TER endeavor to account for our perplexity as human beings, consisting of mind, body and spirit in their holistic form.

Taking into consideration these foundations of TER, the conference brought to light many current issues of educational research. Such issues were discussed in detail, constructively addressing both challenges and opportunities, and including other approaches in academia.

To begin, Peter Taylor (2016) proposed TER as an approach that enables *post/Enlightenment thinking* for addressing pressing needs of our rapidly

globalizing societies, such as sustainable development, climate change and peace building. There is an urgent need to produce graduates with higher-order abilities who are not only critical but also creative and innovative, and who can participate in resolving these global challenges. He raised the question of how we can find alternative knowledge sources for developing such higher-order abilities.

Mahesh Nath Parajuli (2016) advocated seeking such possibilities within the *knowledge-heritage* of local values and practices, which potentially would give its people a particular perspective on living, being closely aligned with nature. Unfortunately, in fulfilling the neo-colonial agenda, modern education and the research endeavor it worships has largely ignored local knowledge heritage, and thus has created a gap between meaning-making approaches and cultural perspectives, thereby creating a space for perspectival conflict and heightened humanitarian tension. So, is heightened conflict and tension the inherent and irreversible destiny of modern education?

Research is at the heart of our educational endeavor, and potentially challenges current understandings and generates pathways to new frontiers. With this in mind, it is likely that innovative researching approaches can be an effective means for *improving wellness*. As a wellness practitioner, Kenneth Tobin (2016) acknowledged the therapeutic value of TER. He called for educators and researchers to address global challenges associated with improving the wellness of humanity. Human miseries, anxieties, restraints and sufferings are rooted in our own uncritically adopted life practices.

For Bishal Sitaula (2016), the primary causes and consequences are deeply rooted in the human mind, and therefore solutions must be searched for within the human sphere. Sitaula believes that transformative education practitioners and researchers need to develop methods of *resilience thinking* in order to help develop our capacity and willingness to transform using wisdom traditions rooted in our cultural/knowledge heritage.

These powerful ideas bring to light the multidimensional nature of TER. In bringing these ideas together one can derive a notion of ‘the what’ of TER, at least to some extent. However, we must remain mindful that TER is not something to define from any single perspective. Rather, TER is an additional innovative practice within the broad field of education; a means of exploring the mutual situatedness of self and other, especially their dialogic and dialectical relationship. TER provides an essential higher-order outlook on emerging global challenges, and a personal/professional/cultural shift oriented towards wellbeing.

### **TER as a Response to Paradigm Shifts – *the why***

‘The what’ of TER, as discussed above, leads us to think about this endeavor in terms of a multidimensional approach. This meaning-making from collaborative interactional texturing of classical foundation and recent discourses now seeks the justification for these emerging approaches. So as to achieve this purpose,

this topic is an attempt to address significance of this form of research practice in present academia. As TER carries broader meanings, its significance has to be understood from multiple perspectives, taking into consideration the different spaces it has created.

First, the need for TER arises from the realization of the *limitations of conventional research* practices guided by the positivist paradigm. Under the Cartesian reductionist agenda of modern education (Kauffman, 2007), learning and meaning-making has witnessed anxiety, locally and globally, regarding the lack of strength and potentiality of its research outcomes. The dominating rigidity of the conventional paradigm (Snow, 1993) has given rise to calls for a deep structural shift in learners' thinking, feeling, living, and working styles. TER is the consequence of this call.

Second, TER is a dynamic process of meaning-making that has evolved continuously and in parallel to *the paradigm shifts* exhibited in our ways of thinking and acting (Molz & Gidley, 2008); akin to the transition from Newtonian mechanics to Einstein's relativity and quantum physics. This shift in worldview calls for *subjective truths* (Snow, 1993) that are contextual in nature. Likewise, the philosophical transition from modernism to postmodernism and poststructuralism has challenged linear hierarchies, and seeks innovative possibilities in our ways of doing things. The accompanying transition to multi-, inter-, post- and trans-disciplinarity promotes *collaborative meaning-making*. Most importantly, the emergence of new rational discourses on *spirituality*, not limited by religious doctrine (Ferrer, 2001), brings new insights from our knowledge heritage systems. The significance of TER, in one way or another, lies in its capacity to address these paradigm shifts.

The worldview shifts exhibited in the natural sciences, social sciences, and spirituality, have generated new possibilities and spaces for fostering learners'/researchers' abilities to innovate and develop their *constructive leadership*. Transformative research occurs when the learner/researcher embraces new and challenging ways of thinking, being, feeling and valuing, a process that brings about a significant life change (Liyanage, 2016). This change may be exhibited in the form of personal or professional transformation (e.g., Mezirow, 1991; Whitehead, 2008). This emerging trend has evoked the footprint of a *humanistic and values-based education* (Sitaula, 2016), which is appreciated as crucial for solving existing adversities in human life. Thus, the significance of TER is crucial for shaping a constructive leadership that possesses a values-driven sensitivity and *compassion* for human beings and our natural heritages.

As discussed above, transformative research is not confined to a single trajectory. Several notions of transformative practices in and among various disciplines may express and highlight *various spaces*, such as an indigenous space, a post-colonial space, a peace space, an inclusive space, a humanitarian

space, an ecological space, and a cosmological space, among others. Each of these spaces carries a transformative potential that can create broader discursive spaces for generating innovative pedagogies of human care, ethics and spirituality (Ferrer, 2011).

These shifts have emerged in response to multiple challenges and possibilities in the field of education and researching. On the one hand, we need to produce a highly-skilled professional *workforce* that is essential for improving modern infrastructure, social services and standards of living (Taylor, 2016). On the other hand, we need to shape individuals with a positive outlook on their own *cultural identities* (Parajuli, 2016), capable of making a constructive shift and challenging the status quo. However, under neo-colonial worship, local cultural capital is largely excluded from contemporary curricula (Luitel, 2009), contributing to the ongoing loss of cultural and linguistic diversity across populations. Today, cultural extinction in rural communities has been recognised as a major contributor to the ongoing loss of humanity's treasure of indigenous wisdom. It has broken the spiritual link between humans and nature. Under such circumstances, there is not much time left to seize the opportunity to take advantage of the prosperity of the natural, cultural, and linguistic diversity that is still available in front of us.

Bringing these ideas together, the multidimensional approach of TER is a response to paradigm shifts exhibited in human ontology and epistemic values. As these shifts have touched almost all spheres of human activity, educational researchers are expected to address these emergenc(i)es. Thus, 'the why' of TER lies in the unique power of its multidimensional approach. From Freire's (1972) transformative meaning-making as socio-cultural approach to Mezirow's (1991) psycho-critical approach, TER has already touched multiple spheres of human understanding. Its purpose is to address the weakness and liminalities embedded in conventional research practices; to address paradigm shifts in thinking and acting; to foster constructive leadership full of compassion; and to reveal emancipatory values within one's own knowledge heritage.

### **TER as An Arts-Based Multi-Paradigmatic Space – *the how***

As a multidimensional approach that emerged as a response to paradigm shifts, the practice of TER leads one to think about its procedures and methods, which form 'the how' of this innovative domain of knowledge and practice. TER advocates the need for new ways to understand phenomena. Every space that has emerged within the sphere of TER has come with its own unique approaches and originality. As such, making-meaning within this practice is multi-perspectival.

In addressing the conference, Bal Chandra Luitel (2016) emphasised *liberatory epistemology*, a much-needed perspective in researching for empowerment, social justice and meaning-centred education. It seeks flexible and innovative approaches in education and educational research, which

challenge the normative belief of some that educational research should be entirely guided by deductive, analytical and propositional logics and genre.

TER inherently embraces a *pluralistic vision of knowing* (Taylor, Taylor & Luitel, 2012). Acknowledging the epistemic integrity of polyglot facets of research methods, TER ensures knowledge construction through diverse forms of epistemological practices. Thus, it seeks possibilities in multi-paradigmatic design spaces, a radical reaction to realist agendas (Baldwin, 2006). A synergistic interplay of multiple paradigms may include *interpretivism's* knowing as interpreting and constructing (Luitel, 2009); *criticalism's* critical self-reflection (Brookfield, 1994) and cultural and ideological critique (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007); *postmodernism's* knowing as breaking linear/structural hierarchy (Wagle, 2016); and *integralism's* knowing as holistic envisioning.

A multi-paradigmatic design space provides transformative researchers with an opportunity to embrace the living body as a site of cultural interactions, with 'self as data' (Ellis, 2004). *Auto/ethnography*, a synthesis of post/modern ethnography and autobiography (Donahay, 1997) has proven to be an effective approach for enabling researchers/readers to reflect critically on their own construction of self/ves.

TER emphasises *aesthetics*, which stitches together different writing genres into a synergistic whole. It synthesizes a mind-centred/intellectual approach with creative participation of non-mental human attributes. In other words, it is to promote the *bricoleur* effect in portraying phenomena and events. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) understand 'bricoleur' as a post/modern and post/experimental literary turn that brings aesthetics into representation. In representing the interaction of multiple discourses, *arts-based inquiry* practice incorporates various genres of writing (e.g., narrative, poetic, photographic, performative) with *rhetorics* such as metaphorical writing, dialogical reasoning, and ironic representation. It not only brings what is hidden to the surface, or speaks of what has been silenced (Fuller, 2000), but also adds *creativity* in knowing and dealing with phenomena.

The multidimensional nature of TER, as a response to shifts in various spheres of human life, has introduced an innovative arts-based multi-paradigmatic research design space. Other innovative approaches to meaning making in TER are still emerging. In short, TER is a call for liberatory epistemology that embraces a pluralistic vision of knowing and that stresses an increasing interest in aesthetics. TER also calls for many other ways of meaning-making drawn from various knowledge heritages that are yet to be explored.

## **TER for Emerging Leaders in Various Life-World Spheres – *the who***

So far, this concept note on TER has conceptualized TER approaches as multidimensional that are significant for addressing shifts in various life-world spheres. An arts-based multi-paradigmatic research design space is acknowledged as a key method/methodology. In relation to this, we now consider ‘the who’ of TER.

For Freire (1972), transformative learning and meaning-making is for those who are in the process of *conscientization*. Here, a learner (who may be a researcher) engages dialectically with his/her pre-constructed biases that are deeply embedded within normative socio-cultural practices. A learner undergoing conscientization considers critically (dialogically or dialectically) an (educational) phenomenon, and emerges with emancipatory values that enables him/her to transcend the restraints of the phenomenon. In this way, TER is for those who seek, through research as an educational endeavor, to become critically aware of hegemonic power-relationships, inequalities, social injustices, and many other social issues. They also seek to be advocates for social justice. Likewise, TER is for educational practitioners who undertake researching as part of learning; an ongoing process of experiencing the world anew (Kolb, 1984). This acknowledges transformative research as/for the personal and professional development of the researcher and the researched. Such researchers engage in experiencing the life-world of any give sphere, describing it, interpreting it, reflecting critically on it, and creatively formulating concepts and conclusions that potentially give future direction for acting more humanely within that sphere (e.g., education, science and technology, ecology, spirituality).

For Mezirow (1991), transformative learning/researching is for those who seek *personal transformation and empowerment*. To achieve this end, they look critically at their own uncritically embedded assumptions and lived experiences. This concept of ‘the who’ of TER is also addressed by living-education-theory approaches. For Whitehead (2008), TER is for self-study researchers, particularly in the field of education, who are inclined to *add value to their work/profession* (e.g., researching, teaching, leading, supervising). TER is also for many other holistic/participatory life practitioners (Ferrer, 2011) who are oriented to adding *spiritual/transpersonal values* within the sphere of their concerns.

In sum, TER is relevant for other emerging leaders inspired to address the urgent educational needs of our rapidly globalizing societies in spheres such as sustainable development, climate change and peace building (Taylor, 2016); for those who seek new possibilities for developing higher-order abilities by drawing on the knowledge heritage of local values and practices (Parajuli, 2016); for those who are inclined to address global challenges associated with the wellness of

humanity (Tobin, 2016); for those who seek resilience thinking towards wisdom traditions (Sitaula, 2016); and for those who seek possibilities within a liberatory epistemology of knowing and researching (Luitel, 2016).

### **TER as Imagining the World Beyond the Given – *the what next***

Kathmandu University's School of Education (KUSEOD) is a fertile academic ground that is germinating the seeds of TER in the international arena of knowledge building, with an established MPhil and PhD research program. Here, we speculate on 'the what next' of this vibrant educational research approach.

At KUSEOD, TER is guided by our vision of the urgent need to transform lives, particularly the marginalized, to harness local cultural capital, and foster an ethic of planetary stewardship. In putting this vision into practice, we have paved the way for culturally contextualized curricula and pedagogies (Luitel, 2009). This involves a texturing of human-rights-based education and community development models. Recently at KUSEOD, Sadruddin Qutoshi (2016) has generated his own living educational theory through soulful inquiry, and Shree Krishna Wagley (2016) has undertaken a psychological exploration of cultural phenomena in educational settings through self-reflective inquiry. Other TER endeavors at an early stage of development include 'beyond the trend' epistemologies such as the Suresh Gautum's (2016) 'mandala paradigm', and mindful observation on mindfulness in education.

### **Conclusion**

By bringing together considerations of the classical foundations of TER with the in-depth discourses in our conference, this concept paper has endeavored to frame the current concept of TER. Our framing of TER has involved considerations of: 'the what' of TER as a multidimensional approach; 'the why' of this domain of knowledge-practice that addresses paradigm shifts in the sphere of the life-world; 'the how' of TER as an arts-based multi-paradigmatic research design space; 'the who' of TER in the form of emerging educational leaders in various spheres of the life-world; and, finally, the 'what next' of an emerging and transcendent TER that enables us to re-imagine the world beyond the given.

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