Bridging critical thinking and transformative learning: The role of perspective-taking

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Abstract
Although the literature on critical thinking and transformative learning has remained relatively distinct, they have both emphasized the importance of working through and resolving states of doubt. There has been less focus, however, on how we can bring ourselves from a confirmed belief to a position of doubt. This is a foundational skill. Without it, the possibility for intellectual and personal growth is limited. In part one, I focus on critical thinking to investigate what ability and/or disposition can help thinkers arouse a state of doubt. I first consider traditional dispositions of critical thinking, specifically reflection and open-mindedness, and argue that they are largely ineffective as they do not confront the problem of cognitive bias. I then propose perspective-taking as an essential tool to bring about a position of doubt. In part two, I examine leading theorists in transformative experience, transformative education, and transformative learning, who have also largely neglected perspective-taking. I illustrate that perspective-taking can initiate some instances of transformative learning and thereby provides a connecting point to critical thinking. Nevertheless, when engaging with perspective-taking exercises, I argue that instructors ought to prioritize the development of students’ critical thinking skills. In part three, I focus my discussion on incorporating nonfiction perspective-taking readings into university course syllabi as a way to develop students’ critical thinking while creating the conditions for transformative learning.

Keywords
Critical thinking, doubt, open-mindedness, perspective taking, reflection, transformative learning

Although the critical thinking and transformative learning literature have proceeded along relatively separate tracks, there are notable areas of convergence. Doubt provides a clear connecting point. We are often in a state of doubt when faced with a challenging problem, but by using the abilities and dispositions of critical thinking, such as reflection

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and critical reasoning, we can resolve the problem and, by extension, resolve our doubt. At the same time, doubt can provide a gateway to transformation. It is often through doubt that we can change who we are, what we believe, and how we act. While critical thinking and transformative learning theorists have noted the importance of working through and resolving states of doubt, there has been less emphasis on arousing states of doubt. This is a foundational skill. Without the ability to bring ourselves from a confirmed belief to a position of doubt, the possibility for intellectual and personal growth is limited.

Although we can recognize the importance of arousing states of the doubt for critical thinking and transformative learning alike, it is by no means clear what skill or skills can facilitate this. In this article, I argue that perspective-taking, which has been under-explored in both the critical thinking and transformative learning literatures, is the foundational skill for helping learners arouse a state of doubt. In Part 1, I focus on critical thinking. I claim that theories of critical thinking ought to be augmented to account for the ability to bring about a position of doubt. I first consider two traditional critical thinking dispositions – reflection and open-mindedness – and argue that they are generally unsuccessful in this regard. While they serve other important functions that help individuals resolve states of doubt, these critical thinking skills do not specifically target those cognitive biases that keep us constrained within habituated thinking patterns. I then argue that perspective-taking is best suited to challenge these habituated patterns and in so doing, help learners arrive at a state of doubt. In Part 2, I consider leading theorists of transformative experience, transformative learning, and transformative education, who like critical thinking theorists, have largely neglected the centrality of doubt arousal and perspective-taking. I illustrate that perspective-taking is a powerful tool to help initiate some transformative learning processes. Although students can respond to a perspective-taking exercise in a variety of ways, I argue that instructors ought to prioritize the development of students’ critical thinking skills rather than directing them toward particular transformative beliefs. In Part 3, I apply this theoretical account of perspective-taking to higher education. Despite the many perspective-taking activities and assessments, I focus my discussion on incorporating nonfiction perspective-taking readings, such as personal essays, autobiographies, and memoirs into course syllabi.

**Critical thinking, doubt, and perspective-taking**

In recent decades, approaches to critical thinking have generally taken a practical turn, pivoting away from more abstract accounts – such as emphasizing the logical relations that hold between statements (Ennis, 1964) – and moving toward an emphasis on belief and action. According to the definition that Robert Ennis (2018) has been advocating for the last few decades, critical thinking is ‘reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do’ (p. 166). Numerous contemporary theorists posit a similar view in which critical thinking guides belief and action (Brookfield, 1987; Kuhn, 2015; Paul and Elder, 2006; Scriven and Paul, 1987), prompting Ennis (2018) to call this collection of views ‘the mainstream concept of critical thinking’ (p. 166). Although the mainstream conception has been successful in providing an account of how thinkers can resolve states of doubt to guide belief and action, a theory of critical thinking must do
more. It must also help thinkers *arouse* states of doubt to question belief and action. In this way, thinkers have the tools not only to solve problems but also to reveal new problems.

Before inquiring into what ability and/or disposition can help thinkers arouse a state of doubt, it will be useful to distinguish between different kinds of problems that are of relevance in a critical thinking context. The first is between an instrumental and intrinsic problem. An instrumental problem is procedural in nature. Since the ends of an instrumental problem are conceptually clear, it is the means of attaining the end that constitutes the problem. For example, consider an individual who has bought a home and has a choice between a variable mortgage rate and a fixed mortgage rate. While this can present a complex problem insofar as the home buyer may take into consideration their financial position and the state of the broader economy, there is no conceptual uncertainty around the concept of a mortgage. The end goal is to have a mortgage that will lead to optimal economic consequences. The problem concerns the kind of mortgage that can achieve this prescribed end. As such, the decision is procedural. Although instrumental problems have clear ends, this is not to minimize their difficulty nor the critical thinking skills that are necessary to resolve them. In many cases, instrumental problems are extremely difficult, requiring exceptional critical thinking skills. In fact, the pedagogy of problem-based learning often focuses on problems that are instrumental in nature.

With an intrinsic problem, on the other hand, it is the very ends that are in dispute. Moral, political, and philosophical problems are most often intrinsic in nature because their solution requires resolving a conceptual rather than procedural problem. Take, for example, the problem of consciousness. Is consciousness reducible or irreducible to the brain? This problem is intrinsic as it requires arriving at an understanding of what constitutes consciousness. Notably, how an individual ends up answering this question can have a transformative effect on their life. If one were to take a materialist position, it would likely result in a non-religious life. If one were to arrive at a panpsychist or dualist position, however, it could entail a religious life. Similarly, consider the problem of what it means to be free in a political sense. Are individuals free when they are unencumbered by government interference or is government support a necessary precondition to be free? The problem of freedom is intrinsic. Regardless of how an individual solves this problem, it is likely to have a significant influence on one’s life, informing a political perspective that could range from libertarian to social democrat. Given the undetermined ends of intrinsic problems, they often have a transformative potential that is lacking in procedural problems. Depending on their solution, they can dramatically change an individual’s conception of self and way of being in the world.¹

The second relevant distinction when considering problems in a critical thinking context is between an objective and a subjective problem. An objective problem is recognized, at least to some extent, by the culture, whether by a large majority or small minority. Regardless of the extent to which the problem has been recognized, it comes to an individual from without. A problem that is presented to an individual in this manner will not necessarily be perceived as a problem. There is the recognition that others regard it as a problem, but the individual does not feel its force. To use the terminology of William James (1897) in *The Will to Believe*, the problem is not ‘live’; it is objective but
not subjective. I am interested in isolating those critical thinking problems that are intrinsic and objective but not yet subjective. In this way, I am interested to understand what critical thinking skill(s) can help an individual recognize the complexity of an intrinsic problem such that it becomes a subjective problem (i.e. it arouses a state of doubt).

A significant contribution of the mainstream concept of critical thinking is the recognition that critical thinking includes not only abilities but also dispositions (Ennis, 1996; Facione et al., 1994; Perkins et al., 1993). In so doing, critical thinking has been brought out of the exclusively theoretical domain and into the forefront of our lives. It is no longer about statements but about people navigating everyday problems to arrive at solutions. Whether it is the abilities and dispositions involved in understanding arguments, evaluating data, or proportioning beliefs to the available evidence, the tools of critical thinking help individuals proceed from a problem to a solution. It is by working through such problems that one can arrive at a belief and a course of action. In this way, the mainstream theory of critical thinking is generally aligned with the purpose of thinking itself. As the psychologist, Jonathan Baron (1993) notes, ‘Thinking is a mental activity that is used to resolve doubt about what to do, what to believe, or what to desire or seek’ (p. 193).

It might seem that this mainstream concept, with its emphasis on solving problems to guide belief and action, is the ideal theoretical approach to help thinkers arrive at a state of doubt. Before seeking to broaden the mainstream concept of critical thinking, we can inquire into traditional critical thinking abilities and dispositions to see if they are sufficient to help individuals bring about a state of doubt. The two strongest candidates in my estimation are reflection and open-mindedness. I consider each of these in turn.

Given Ennis’ well-known definition of critical thinking as ‘reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do’ (Ennis, 2018: 166), reflection is a good place to start in an attempt to explain how a thinker can bring themselves to a position of doubt. Reflection is undoubtedly a powerful thinking tool. As has been shown in professional disciplines such as nursing, reflection can help individuals integrate their experience to further inform their practice (Contreras et al., 2020; Pai, 2016). This model of reflection aligns with experiential learning theories such as Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle. When an individual reflects on a novel experience, the knowledge that was previously latent can become manifest.

Although reflection is a necessary component of critical thinking, it is generally useful to help resolve a preexisting problem, which is often brought about by an experience. However, if there is no novel experience to process, and we simply reflect upon our assumptions on an issue, we are then constrained within our habituated perspective. It is extremely unlikely that an individual will be able to uncover their assumptions and recognize the merits of other positions when reflecting in this manner. Stephen Brookfield’s (2015) discussion of paradigmatic assumptions, which inform our habitual patterns of behavior, can help to elucidate the limitations of reflection. These assumptions are woven into the fabric of our lives such that ‘we don’t even recognize them as assumptions, even after they’re pointed out to us’ (Brookfield, 2015: 49). Even when our reflection is informed by novel experiences and new evidence, we are resistant to change our beliefs. As Brookfield (2015) says:
Paradigmatic assumptions are examined critically only after a great deal of resistance, and it takes a considerable amount of contrary evidence and disconfirming experiences to change them. But when they are challenged and changed, the consequences for our lives are explosive. (p. 50)

Reflection in and of itself, which involves neither a novel experience nor an interlocutor questioning our way of thinking, will be mostly ineffective in uncovering deficiencies in our most deeply held beliefs. This is because our thinking is structured by a range of cognitive biases that prevent a fair hearing of alternative viewpoints, including myside bias, which is of particular concern to the reflective reasoning process (Baron, 1995; Mercier and Sperger, 2017). When we reflect, we do not have to contend with the subtlety and nuance of opposing viewpoints. Instead, we can frame the issue in a way that aligns with our prior beliefs, thereby ensuring the outcome of the reflection. Since thinkers are often unable to come up with arguments for opposing positions, let alone arguments that will overturn their current perspective, the reflection will tend to result in maintaining one’s perspective. In describing the power of myside bias, Mercier and Sperger (2017) write, ‘A lot of evidence shows that reasoning has a myside bias. Reason rarely questions reasoners’ intuitions, making it very unlikely that it would correct any misguided intuitions they might have’ (p. 218). Although some rare individuals may be able to root out blind spots in their thinking through reflective reasoning, most of us are not able to arouse a state of doubt by reflecting on our assumptions (Haidt, 2001). We have too many cognitive defense mechanisms in place to guard against the psychologically distressing experience of one’s conception of the world being called into question.

Cognitive biases, such as myside bias, are particularly prominent with intrinsic problems because these problems often concern deeply held beliefs that are central to our identity, such as religious and political beliefs. Instrumental problems, on the other hand, tend not to implicate our biases to the same extent. If I am reflecting on whether to choose a variable or fixed mortgage rate, my myside bias is far less likely to play a role in my reasoning process as it poses no threat to my self-conception. Moreover, I am unlikely to be castigated by my family and friends for choosing one type of mortgage over the other. To conclude, reflection can be effective in resolving doubt, but it is far less effective in arousing doubt.

Although reflection is generally unable to bring about a state of doubt, perhaps this is one of the functions of open-mindedness. One of the advantages of open-mindedness over reflection is that it brings us in direct contact with the views of others. While in reflection we may frame an issue – whether consciously or unconsciously – to suit our purposes, an open-minded thinker ought to be attentive to the perspective of others. Most critical thinking researchers agree that open-mindedness is a component of critical thinking (Ennis, 2018; Facione et al., 1994; Perkins et al., 1993). Arguably, William Hare’s account of open-mindedness has been the most influential within the critical thinking literature. According to Hare (1979), ‘A person who is open-minded is disposed to revise or reject the position he holds if sound objections are brought against it’ (p. 9). For Hare, open-mindedness is not only a disposition, but it is also an ability. He writes, ‘a person must be willing and able to revise his position if he is to be open-minded’ (Hare, 1979: 8). If open-mindedness includes both the ability and the disposition to revise one’s beliefs
when sound reasons are presented, then the ability and disposition to analyze, assess, and evaluate evidence are at its core. By building reasoning into his theory, Hare can distinguish open-minded thinkers from gullible thinkers. Those thinkers who are so open to new evidence that they lose their reasoning faculty are thereby not open-minded at all.2

Hare’s reason-based theory of open-mindedness works well when a problem is already recognized (i.e. a subjective problem). We can then assess potentially disconfirming evidence and navigate the problem toward a solution by either maintaining or revising our beliefs.

His theory also works well for instrumental problems because we tend not to have deep motivations to preserve our beliefs with respect to these kinds of problems. If I am a proponent of a variable mortgage rate, but I am presented with strong evidence to consider a fixed rate, I will be less likely to have resistance toward receiving this evidence. Using a reason-based view of open-mindedness, I could resolve the problem by working through the disconfirming evidence and arrive at a state of doubt and potentially a different viewpoint altogether. Nevertheless, Hare’s theory is unlikely to help us arouse intrinsic problems because we are once again faced with the problem of cognitive bias. In particular, Hare’s view has no mechanism to help individuals confront their motivated reasoning (Southworth, 2020). A wealth of psychological research has demonstrated that when we are presented with evidence that disconfirms our deeply held beliefs, we tend to spend a considerable amount of time and cognitive effort to find problems with that evidence (Edwards and Smith, 1996; Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). This is because we have deep-seated motivations to preserve those beliefs that are central to our conception of self. Changing these beliefs can be distressing, and our cognitive biases help us take the path of least resistance. As a result, open-mindedness – at least as it is traditionally conceived in the critical thinking literature – is unlikely to bring individuals to a position of doubt for intrinsic problems.3

Working within the field of virtue epistemology, Jason Baehr (2011) has developed an account of open-mindedness that is more amenable to arousing a state of doubt. Rather than focusing on the ability to seriously consider disconfirming evidence, Baehr (2011) argues that the essence of open-mindedness is ‘to transcend a default cognitive standpoint’ (p. 202). In this way, he offers an expansive conception of open-mindedness – rather than a reason-based view – insofar as the focus is beyond confirming or disconfirming one’s beliefs. This expansion involves ‘breaking free’ from a previous perspective, which then allows the ‘taking up’ of another perspective (p. 206). For Baehr, this ‘taking up’, which he regards as distinct from the ‘breaking free’ of open-mindedness, involves intellectual empathy. In a previous work, I have questioned Baehr’s distinction between breaking free and taking up on the grounds that one cannot break free from a perspective without necessarily taking up another perspective (Southworth, 2021). Nevertheless, I do believe Baehr is on the right track by positing intellectual empathy as fundamental to the taking up of a new perspective.

Although philosophers and psychologists continue to debate the nature of empathy, it can be helpful to distinguish between its different aspects, particularly between empathic concern and perspective-taking (Decety and Yoder, 2016). Empathic concern involves the motivation to care for another’s well-being, which is certainly necessary for being a good person, but it is not a requirement for being a good critical thinker.
Perspective-taking, on the other hand, which involves putting oneself in the position of another individual, is necessary. Before we can effectively consider alternative perspectives, including potentially disconfirming evidence to our own view, we need to first understand the perspectives of others. By imagining what it is like to be in someone else’s position, to understand how they think and feel about the issue under consideration, we can better appreciate their alternative view. Perspective-taking thereby has a different directional focus than reason-based theories of open-mindedness. While the latter is directed inward toward confirming or disconfirming one’s beliefs, perspective-taking is directed outward toward another individual or group of individuals, including those with very different backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs. Given this focus on the other, cognitive biases such as myside bias and motivated reasoning are mitigated. After all, when we are engaged in a perspective-taking exercise, our motivation is to better understand someone else’s viewpoint, not to preserve or change our beliefs.

While some theorists have highlighted the importance of empathic concern to critical thinking (Thayer-Bacon, 1993), there has been a notable lack of investigation into perspective-taking. In the seven dispositions of critical thinking developed by Facione et al. (1994), there is no mention of being able to put oneself in the perspective of another individual. Moreover, it is not included in the list of critical thinking dispositions and abilities presented by theorists such as Ennis (2018) and Petress (2004). There are some exceptions. Siegel (2017) has noted the importance of ‘putting oneself in the place of one’s interlocutors and seeing things from their perspective’ (p. 129). Likewise, Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2006) have highlighted the importance of intellectual empathy, particularly perspective-taking, to being a fair-minded thinker.

If we do not learn how to take on others’ perspectives and accurately think as they think, we will not be able to fairly judge their ideas and beliefs. Trying to think within the viewpoint of others is not easy, though. It is one of the most difficult skills to acquire. (Paul and Elder, 2006: 12)

It is useful to situate perspective-taking and fairmindedness within Paul’s broader distinction between weak-sense and strong-sense critical thinkers. A weak sense critical thinker is skilled at using critical thinking tools to serve ‘egocentric’ and ‘sociocentric’ biases (Paul, 1992). Weak-sense critical thinkers can make strong and logical arguments, but they are not fair-minded as they lack the ability to take on the perspective of others (Paul, 1992). Paul’s discussion of egocentric and sociocentric biases can be reframed in terms of cognitive biases. While weak-sense critical thinkers are beholden by a host of cognitive biases, strong-sense critical thinkers have a commitment toward the truth, and this requires a commitment to understand the perspective of others. Perspective-taking is a foundational critical thinking skill because it helps to confront cognitive biases, such as myside bias and motivated reasoning, which can result in a state of doubt and ultimately a change in one’s beliefs.

Psychologists who study perspective taking have documented how it can reduce prejudice, including racial bias (Finlay and Stephan, 2000; Todd et al., 2011; Vescio et al., 2003), age bias (Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000) biases toward individuals with a disease (Batson et al., 1997), and biases toward the homeless (Batson et al., 1997). Researchers have postulated that the success of perspective-taking in reducing bias is
due to an expansion of one’s sense of self whereby an individual comes to regard an out-group as more self-like (Davis et al., 1996). Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) note that ‘Perspective-taking has been shown to lead to a merging of the self and the other, in which the perspective-taker’s thoughts toward the target become more ‘selflike’’ (p. 709). This broadening of the self is precisely what is needed to overcome the challenge of cognitive bias. When individuals put themselves in the position of someone else, their attention is placed on that individual. They are not thinking about how they will rebut a claim to maintain their beliefs. Instead, there is a commitment to try to understand someone else’s perception of the issue. Through this expansive exercise of understanding the other, one’s prior beliefs may come into conflict with this new understanding, resulting in a state of doubt.

Although perspective-taking is an essential skill to arouse states of doubt, we do not engage in these activities with this goal in mind. We engage in perspective-taking because we are genuinely interested to learn about another individual’s experience. One’s imaginative ability to infer the thoughts and feelings of another can induce a state of doubt, but this is a consequence of perspective-taking, not the goal. Moreover, perspective-taking will not always result in a state of doubt. In fact, most often it will not. Even in these cases, however, thinkers can broaden their horizons by learning about the experiences of others, which can increase their understanding and acceptance.

Perspective-taking is essential to critical thinking. In fact, I maintain that critical thinking is best construed as a dynamic process between arousing and resolving states of doubt. Once the expansive skills of critical thinking such as perspective-taking have generated a state of doubt, then the more narrowing critical thinking skills such as reflection and reasoning can work toward resolving the doubt. If the result is a change of belief, one that changes one’s sense of self and way of engaging with the world, then we also have an instance of transformative learning.

Transformer learning, doubt, and perspective-taking

Just as doubt figures prominently in critical thinking, the same is true for transformative learning. Theorists of transformative experience, transformative learning, and transformative education have recognized the importance of doubt to varying degrees, but there has been a lack of emphasis on specific strategies for how learners can arouse states of doubt to initiate a transformative learning process.

Learning is more than the accumulation of knowledge. It has the potential to transform, to fundamentally change who we are and how we engage with the world. This transformation can certainly occur without a state of doubt. An individual could always have known, for example, that they wanted to be a parent. Despite having no doubt in their mind, becoming a parent was nevertheless a transformative experience, one that changed their life in ways that they could have not envisioned beforehand. Many transformative experiences are of this kind, which is exemplified by the work of L.A. Paul. For Paul (2014), a transformative experience is both epistemically and personally transformative. It is epistemically transformative insofar as an individual has a new kind of experience, and it is personally transformative insofar as this experience fundamentally changes the individual’s way of being in the world. Paul (2014) argues that when one
encounters a choice that will result in a transformative experience, the decision cannot be made using traditional decision-making criteria. Since one can neither know nor project how one will be changed by the experience, the decision is made on provisional values and preferences. When we encounter such transformative choices, we are in the dark. We cannot know who we will become.

Paul and John Quiggin (2020) have applied Paul’s framework of transformative experience to education, emphasizing that the decision to go to university is a transformative choice. Before embarking on university education, students cannot predict what they will learn about, who they will meet, what skills they will develop, and how these novel experiences will change their beliefs and values. Although there are numerous transformative aspects of university education, the authors give particular emphasis to critical thinking. They write: ‘the primary goal of training in critical thinking is an epistemic transformation that is not merely the acquisition of new knowledge, but the adoption of a new and better way of reasoning’ (Paul and Quiggin, 2020: 572). By developing critical thinking skills, students develop the reasoning tools that can reorient their beliefs and values. Therefore, critical thinking can result in a transformative experience and, in turn, transformative learning.

While I agree with the conclusion, I believe the authors are conflating different kinds of transformative experiences and, by extension, different kinds of transformative learning. Going away to university and developing critical thinking skills each have the potential to be transformative, but they have notable differences. First, there is a difference in scope. The choice of going to university is much broader compared to developing one’s critical thinking skills. We could say that the latter is contained within a broader transformative experience. Second, there is a difference with respect to reversibility. The choice of going to university, which is made at a discrete moment in time, is irreversible. One cannot undo the choice once it has been made. However, when it comes to using critical thinking skills to change one’s beliefs and values on a topic, one could always reconsider the issue – if, for example, new evidence is available – and reverse one’s position. Rather than a synchronic choice, made at a specific point in time, the choice has the possibility to be diachronic, made over a duration of time. One could even test a new belief or behavior before finally committing to it. Finally, there is a difference with respect to the involvement of doubt. Although an individual going away to university cannot project who they will become, they may have no doubt about the decision. They may have always wanted to go away to university. By contrast, using critical thinking skills in a way that results in transformative learning will likely include a state of doubt as a pivotal stage in the process.

Although Paul’s conception of transformative experience neglects the role of doubt, this is not the case for Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. This theory of adult learning focuses on how individuals can reorient their perspective to bring meaningful change into their lives. Mezirow highlights the process of reflecting on and questioning one’s habituated patterns of knowing, believing, and feeling (i.e. a meaning scheme) and ultimately ushering in a new way of being. Mezirow (1991) has listed clear stages of this transformative process, the first of which is ‘a disorienting dilemma’ (p. 168) that puts into tension one’s meaning scheme with a novel experience (i.e. a potentially transformative experience). This disorienting dilemma results in a state of
doubt. Nevertheless, while transformative learning theory has been useful in explaining instances of transformative change in which individuals find themselves in a state of doubt, there has been little investigation into how individuals can bring about a position of doubt.

To illustrate this, consider the following two scenarios. Scenario 1: Janet grew up in a rural community on a farm. She was raised within a family and broader culture that never questioned the practice of eating meat. It was second nature to her. After high school, Janet got a job working at a meat processing plant where she witnessed the horrific treatment of animals. Janet was deeply unsettled by this experience. She quit her job and upon reflection, became a vegan. This experience resulted in a transformation in her way of being in the world, a shift that informed many aspects of her life – from the individuals she socialized with to her political commitments to her career interests.

Scenario 2: Janet grew up in a rural community on a farm. She was raised within a family and broader culture that never questioned the practice of eating meat. It was second nature to her. After high school, Janet went to university. In her first term of study, she enrolled in an environmental ethics course where she encountered arguments against the eating of meat. Janet began to doubt what she had previously taken for granted. By the end of the academic year, she had become a vegan. This resulted in a transformation in her way of being in the world, a shift that informed many aspects of her life – from the individuals she socialized with to her political commitments to her career interests.

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory can account for Scenario 1. In this case, Janet found herself in a disorienting dilemma in which there was a tension between her beliefs about eating meat and her experience of witnessing the unjust treatment of animals. Once such a conflict is present, Mezirow’s process of transformative learning can begin, which can include reflection, questioning one’s assumptions, exploring alternative approaches, and finally, integrating a new perspective (Mezirow, 1991). Nevertheless, transformative learning theory cannot effectively account for the second scenario. When Janet was considering arguments against the eating of meat in her environmental ethics course, she used her critical thinking skills to bring herself to a position of doubt. To explain Janet’s transformative change, it is not sufficient to begin with the disorienting dilemma. Without the ability to arouse a state of doubt, Janet’s transformative process would have never occurred. Her previous perspective would have remained entrenched. To fully understand some instances of transformative learning, therefore, we need to consider the learner before a state of doubt or a disorienting dilemma is even present, back when the learner confidently held an opposing position.

A theoretical approach to transformative education that considers the learner prior to the transformative event has recently been developed by Douglas Yacek (2021). His aspirational approach to transformative education involves two components: first, an intimation of value, in which a learner recognizes a substantial difference with their current valuing; and second, an inspiration to close that gap to bring this new value into their life. In order for an instance of transformative learning to be initiated, learners must be in an optimal position to recognize the value of this new ideal. Yacek calls such learners pre-aspirants. He discusses numerous characteristics of pre-aspirants such as humility, openness, and curiosity as well as strategies for how teachers can awaken students’ aspiration through epiphanies. These include modeling aspiration for students,
scaffolding concepts, and focusing on dialogues between teachers and students. Although Yacek (2021) has developed a rich theory of transformative education, one that can surely accommodate strategies for arousing doubt, the concrete examples that he highlights do not involve doubt. As such, the pedagogical strategies that he provides to help awaken students’ aspirations do not include strategies for how teachers can help students to arouse states of doubt.

One of the merits of Yacek’s work is his categorization of other approaches to transformative education including the conversion approach, which is of importance for our inquiry as some proponents incorporate perspective taking. Yacek (2021) writes:

As an approach to transformative education, conversion implies an educational process in which students come to appreciate the power of a comprehensive new ideal and to radically reorient their lives according to its dictates. The rhetoric of conversion can be found in several areas of contemporary educational research, most commonly in the related areas of multicultural education, critical pedagogy and social justice education. (p. 21)

To support the goal of social justice, the conversion approach to transformative education involves ‘the empathic identification with the oppressed’, which leads to an ‘unsettling of students’ previous ways of thinking, feeling and acting’ (Yacek, 2021: 31). According to Yacek, once students have their perspectives destabilized, the goal of educators in these disciplines is then to get students ‘to adhere to the relevant worldview’ (p. 27). Yacek is critical of the conversion approach to transformative education not only because it is too prescriptive in directing students toward particular beliefs and world-views, but the ‘thoroughgoing destabilization of students’ prior perspectives’ (p. 40) can result in a kind of transformative trauma if the shattered framework is not replaced by a new ideal. This can in turn lead to a harmful disruption of a student’s personal identity. While I agree with the concerns that Yacek highlights, it is not entirely clear that these criticisms apply to all instances of the conversion approach.

It is helpful here to consider a common distinction made in the transformation literature – that between sudden and gradual transformations. Yacek’s criticisms apply to those transformations that are gradual in nature but not to those transformations that are sudden. To recognize this, we can consider the work of Ann Berlak, who Yacek regards as adopting a conversion approach to transformative education. Berlak uses perspective-taking activities to help students who have not experienced racism or oppression to both understand and feel its harms. Berlak (2004) writes:

Becoming a secondhand witness to racism – imagining victims’ trauma in their own bodies – is painful for secondhand witnesses because, as for the victims themselves, it involves shattering frameworks and integrating painful knowledge. (p. 136)

It is important to note that this shattering of a previous framework generally does not leave students in a state of doubt. The act of witnessing, as Berlak notes, has the potential to be transformative in and of itself. In other words, the transformation is sudden. This is not to say that the transformation is complete, but instead of working through a state of doubt to arrive at a particular belief, students often work through feelings of
guilt and pain to process a transformative change that has already occurred. In these cases of sudden transformative change, Yacek’s criticism of the conversion approach does not apply. First, the instructor does not direct the student to a particular belief. Rather, the transformative change emerges from within the student. The perspective-taking exercise has such a powerful effect that it reorients the student’s viewpoint. Second, the worry of transformative trauma is mitigated, since the new ideal has been adopted by the student.

While instances of sudden transformations do not involve a state of doubt, this is not the case for gradual transformations. In these instances, a perspective-taking exercise does not completely reorient a student’s prior perspective, but rather challenges it, resulting in a state of doubt. Yacek’s criticisms of the conversion approach are justified in these cases. When instructors are too directive in resolving students’ state of doubt, this comes at a significant cost to student autonomy. Students are not afforded the opportunity to work through their doubt by engaging in a critical thinking process to discover what they believe. As such, students are prevented from being the author of their transformations, which can result in disruptions to their personal identity.

In a transformative learning context, there are broadly three ways in which a student can respond to a perspective-taking exercise, and each response requires instructors to focus on different aspects of critical thinking. First, students can experience a sudden transformation as a result of a perspective-taking exercise. As Berlak’s work highlights, it is necessary in these cases to help students process this transformative change through critical thinking skills such as reflection. Second, students can be brought to a state of doubt through a perspective-taking exercise. In these cases, instructors ought to help students navigate this doubt through critical thinking skills such as analyzing and evaluating arguments. Whether the transformative change is sudden or gradual, the change ought to emerge from within the student. Finally, after a perspective-taking exercise, a student may not experience any kind of transformation, either sudden or gradual. Instead, their previous perspective could remain entrenched. In these cases, educators can help students develop their perspective-taking skills so that they can better appreciate and understand the experiences of other individuals. Perspective-taking, like all critical thinking skills, is not easy to develop and as such, it requires instruction and practice. Nevertheless, it is perfectly consistent for a student to retain their viewpoint after engaging effectively with a perspective-taking exercise.

To conclude, perspective-taking can play a foundational role in a transformative learning process. By incorporating perspective-taking activities and assessments into the course curriculum, instructors can create the conditions for transformative learning. However, transformative learning should not be the pedagogical goal. Instead, instructors ought to prioritize the development of critical thinking skills to support students along their respective transformative journeys. Nevertheless, it is perfectly consistent for a student to retain their viewpoint after engaging effectively with a perspective-taking exercise.

Using perspective-taking texts across the disciplines

I have argued that perspective-taking is an essential tool for critical thinking as it enables thinkers to expand their empathic understanding, which can challenge their default
cognitive framework and result in a state of doubt. Thinkers can then engage other critical thinking skills to resolve the state of doubt, which may result in an instance of transformative learning. Although there are many ways that perspective-taking can be integrated into the classroom at all levels of learning, I am particularly interested in considering perspective-taking readings at the university level. Traditional academic readings – including textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly books – tend to make objective, evidence-based arguments to support theoretical positions. We regard these readings as necessary for the growth of critical thinkers. Gradually, through training and effort, students develop the ability to read academic texts critically by learning how to question, evaluate, and criticize claims. Despite these benefits of traditional academic texts, they have a notable shortcoming: they do not target students’ empathic natures.

Perspective-taking texts, on the other hand, enable students to appreciate the experiences of individuals from very different backgrounds, which can reframe their cognitive frameworks. This has been recognized by Martha Nussbaum (1997, 2010). She has argued that the ability to take on the perspective of other individuals is an overarching educational aim for developing good citizens. She calls this perspective-taking ability the narrative imagination (sometimes she refers to it as the literary imagination). She regards the narrative imagination as interconnected with another central aim of education, namely critical thinking. Before we can provide a critical judgment on an issue, Nussbaum maintains that we need to understand the experiences of others.

If the literary imagination develops compassion, and if compassion is essential for civic responsibility, then we have good reason to teach works that promote the types of compassionate understanding we want and need. This means including works that give voice to the experiences of groups in our society that we urgently need to understand, such as members of other cultures, ethnic and racial minorities, women, and lesbians and gay men. (Nussbaum, 1997: 99–100)

Without the cultivation of the narrative imagination, we would not be able to sufficiently understand the experiences of others, and therefore, we would be unable to provide a critical judgment on a related issue.

Despite the interconnections between critical thinking and the narrative imagination, Nussbaum distinguishes these two educational aims according to different disciplines. She associates critical thinking with humanistic disciplines such as philosophy, but she does not claim that the humanities have a sole claim on critical thinking. She notes that disciplines within the sciences and social sciences are ‘at their best’ when they adopt ‘the spirit of the humanities’ (Nussbaum, 2010: 7). But what about developing the narrative imagination, specifically developing the ability to have compassion for others with different experiences and backgrounds? In Not For Profit, Nussbaum argues that we need to preserve the arts disciplines precisely because they fulfill this necessary role of developing students’ compassionate natures. As Nussbaum says, ‘instruction in literature and the arts can cultivate sympathy in many ways’ (p. 106) and that it is the role of educators to choose works that ‘address particular cultural blindspots’ (p. 108). Indeed, it is precisely through works of art that we can provide students with ‘a more adequate vision of the unseen’ (p. 107).
It is certainly true that the arts disciplines can awaken our compassionate understanding. By taking the perspective of characters in novels, readers are able to empathize with those who suffer from poverty, disease, and/or injustice, allowing them to see the world through a different lens and ultimately changing their vantage points regarding dignity of the individual. Novels, for example, have continued to influence transformative changes in our moral, political, and social attitudes. The examples are endless but consider *The Grapes of Wrath* helping to change perceptions of the poor or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* helping to change perceptions of mental illness. Although I agree with Nussbaum that the arts are essential disciplines in part because they help students cultivate their empathic knowledge, these disciplines need not have an exclusive claim on the development of students’ empathy. This is because perspective-taking texts need not be limited to fictional texts like novels, plays and films. By using texts such as autobiographies, memoirs, and personal essays, the development of empathy can become a core component of all disciplines that engage in moral, political, and social questions.

Although Nussbaum recognizes an association between perspective-taking and critical thinking, she fails to recognize the extent of this association. They should not be construed as distinct educational aims. After all, the ability to take on the perspective of other individuals is a requirement for effective critical thinking and is therefore best construed as a component of critical thinking. Just as critical thinking extends across all disciplines, the same is true for perspective-taking. As an example of using a perspective-taking text beyond the arts disciplines, let us return to the example of an environmental ethics course. In the course section on animal rights, we would expect the instructor to assign traditional academic readings that make utilitarian and deontological arguments concerning the moral status of non-human animals. But the instructor could also include perspective-taking texts into the course. One such text is David Foster Wallace’s personal essay *Consider the Lobster*. The primary purpose of this essay is not to make a theoretical argument, but to present the complexities of a concrete experience that details the author’s qualms around cooking and eating a lobster. Ultimately, the essay encourages the reader to adopt not only Wallace’s perspective but also the lobster’s, which shows that perspective-taking can extend beyond humans to include all sentient creatures. In the following passage, Wallace juxtaposes the pedestrian activity of preparing a meal at home with a lingering concern of having committed a moral transgression.

The basic scenario is that we come in from the store and make our little preparations like getting the kettle filled and boiling, and then we lift the lobsters out of the bag or whatever retail container they came home in. Whereupon some uncomfortable thing starts to happen. However stuporous a lobster is from the trip home, for instance, it tends to come alarmingly to life when placed in boiling water. If you’re tilting it from a container into the steaming kettle, the lobster will sometimes try to cling to the container’s sides or even to hook its claws over the kettle’s rim like a person trying to keep from going over the edge of a roof. And worse is when the lobster’s fully immersed. Even if you cover the kettle and turn away, you can usually hear the cover rattling and clanking as the lobster tries to push it off. Or the creature’s claws scraping the sides of the kettle as it thrashes around. The lobster, in other words, behaves very much as you or I would behave if we were plunged into boiling water. A blunter way to say this is that the lobster acts as if it’s in terrible pain, causing some cooks to leave the kitchen altogether and
to take one of those little lightweight plastic oven-timers with them into another room and wait until the whole process is over. (Wallace, 2007: 247–248)

As we imagine the lobster thrashing in the boiling kettle, we feel for the lobster. This feeling response broadens our perspective, taking us beyond the confirming or disconfirming of our beliefs. It enables us to identify with something or someone outside of ourselves.

If we reconsider Janet, who had never considered the possibility that eating a sentient being could be immoral, a perspective-taking text such as Wallace’s essay would be more likely to call into question her assumptions than an academic article making a theoretical argument. After all, when we are presented with a non-narrative reading that opposes our viewpoint on a topic, we are motivated to find flaws in that evidence to preserve our beliefs (Taber and Lodge, 2006). But when reading a text that is written in either the first or second person, as opposed to the traditional third-person perspective of academic texts, the reader is less focused on finding flaws and fallacies. Like when watching a movie or reading a novel, when we read a personal essay, memoir, or autobiography we put ourselves in the perspective of the other by imagining what it must be like to have their experience. In this way, a perspective-taking text can better address the problem of motivated reasoning because the focus is not on confirming or disconfirming one’s beliefs. Instead, the goal is to transcend one’s habitual standpoint to understand the perspective of another. This central tool of critical thinking can produce a conflict between the perspective-taking experience and one’s beliefs (e.g. eating lobsters is moral), producing a state of doubt in which an objective problem becomes subjective. From here, the student can utilize other critical thinking skills to navigate the doubt, which, depending on the outcome, could result in transformative learning.

It could be argued that instead of incorporating perspective-taking texts into disciplines across the curriculum, we should instead focus our efforts on changing the reading behavior of students. This is an approach adopted by the writing scholar Peter Elbow (1998), who has called the pervasive attitude of academic readers ‘the doubting game’. By continually questioning and doubting the text, students develop some key aspects of critical thinking, such as analytical reasoning skills. Nevertheless, this doubting attitude fails to target skills that are necessary to understand challenging or foreign ideas and can thereby further entrench a reader’s biases (Elbow, 1998). Elbow’s solution to the doubting game is what he calls ‘the believing game’. Instead of taking an attitude of critical skepticism to reading, to seek out its flaws, he advocates for students to adopt an attitude of belief. This approach helps students overcome their assumptions and biases, encouraging them ‘to get inside the head of someone’ who sees things differently (Elbow, 1998: 149). Readers can then recognize the hidden merits of an author’s views and better understand different perspectives.

The believing game as a solution to the doubting game has a deep problem, however. It is difficult to get inside the head of someone who is presenting an abstract theoretical argument, particularly if the author’s perspective is foreign to one’s experience. For example, I can adopt a believing attitude toward a text that advocates policy measures to reduce poverty, but if I have had a privileged socioeconomic background, I may be ignorant of the deeper experiential reality upon which this theoretical approach is based. An
exercise of belief cannot acquaint me with the deep suffering, anger, and shame that individuals living in poverty can experience. If I do not have an appreciation of the first-person perspective that underpins and drives this theoretical approach, my theoretical understanding will remain but a shallow representation. I can believe but I cannot know. Rather than encouraging students to adopt a believing stance as Elbow suggests, a far better strategy is to vary the kinds of texts that students read by incorporating more perspective-taking readings into course syllabi. Such readings can help students to expand their cognitive frameworks, which is necessary for effective critical thinking and can even initiate a process of transformative learning.

**Conclusion**

Perspective-taking is a critical skill to help individuals come to recognize intrinsic problems. This includes recognizing problems of social injustice, which requires being receptive to the viewpoints of individuals who often have different experiences and backgrounds. Without the ability to take on the perspective of others, students will remain entrenched in an accustomed way of perceiving, feeling, and thinking. The role of perspective-taking within a theory of critical thinking can thereby help address oversights in our thinking by bringing problems into the light. This broadened perspective can in turn facilitate transformative learning whereby we reorient our beliefs, actions, and way of being in the world.

I have tried to illustrate that the ability to generate problems, to move beyond one’s habituated patterns of thinking, and to recognize complexity is essential to both critical thinking and transformative learning. Thinking critically involves an ongoing process of resolving and arousing states of doubt. Perspective-taking is essential to the latter. When students develop the ability to recognize problems and bring themselves to a state of doubt, they can unleash the full potential of learning: its power to transform.

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**Notes**

1. This distinction between instrumental and intrinsic problems is similar to Richard Paul’s (1987) distinction between monological and multilogical problems. For Paul, monological
problems take place within a single frame of reference, whereas multilogical problems depend on multiple frames of reference. It is precisely because of these multiple perspectives that the ends of an intrinsic problem are in dispute.

2. Hare’s view of open-mindedness has been lauded by Harvey Siegel (2009) as ‘compelling and completely persuasive’ (p. 26). Siegel, however, does not regard the ability to reason as a commitment of Hare’s theory. Siegel’s interpretation focuses on the dispositional aspect of Hare’s view. But for Hare, open-mindedness is more than a disposition. It is also an ability, one that involves overcoming the problem of gullibility through reasoning. As Hare (2011) says, ‘Being receptive to the point of being duped is not a form of open-mindedness at all and such gullibility undermines our claim to have a concern for truth and a genuine desire for knowledge’ (p. 13).

3. Robert Ennis’ conception of open-mindedness faces similar challenges to Hare’s view. For Ennis, open-mindedness has two components: to ‘seriously consider other points of view’ and to ‘withhold judgment when the evidence and reasons are insufficient’ (Ennis, 2018: 167). Similar to Hare, the ability and disposition to seriously consider other points of view requires reasoning skills. But how does Ennis address our motivations to preserve our prior beliefs? Once again, we are faced with the challenge of motivated reasoning. Moreover, Ennis’ second component involving the withholding of a decision does not concern the generation of a problem but rather its resolution.

4. While the relationship between empathy and perspective-taking is complex, I simply assume that they are often conjoined. It is important to note, however, that empathy is not necessary for perspective-taking. As Batson’s (2011) research suggests, perspective-taking can be decoupled from empathy as it is possible to take on another individual’s perspective without having any feelings for them. What is necessary for perspective-taking, in my estimation, is an act of imagination to consider someone else’s experience. Walton (2015), meanwhile, has argued that what is necessary for empathy is not imagining but rather the ‘phenomenal concepts in the empathizer’s experience’ (p. 9). Walton’s argument assumes a broad concept of empathy, one that includes contagion. If we narrow our analysis to perspective-taking, then I maintain that an act of imagination is necessary.

5. Similar to Mezirow, doubt figures prominently in the approach to transformative learning developed by Andrea English (2013). She argues that transformative learning emerges from discontinuities in learning, or what she calls negative experiences, which have an inward and outward turn. The inward turn involves reflecting upon what brought about the negative experience whereas the outward turn involves the learner’s changed outlook on the world. The negative experiences that precede the inward turn function in much the same way as a disorienting dilemma, but there is little discussion regarding how learners can bring about negative experiences. English does discuss the concept of pedagogical tact, which highlights how teachers can help awaken negative experiences in students. This largely involves getting to know the student and ‘helping the learner find her voice’ by being ‘receptive to the learner’s different way of seeing the world’ (English, 2013: 128). While this approach provides a useful overarching philosophy, it lacks specific details for arousing states of doubt.

6. Like Nussbaum, Charles Taylor (2016) has emphasized the ‘unsubstitutable’ nature of narratives (p. 291). Learning about the experiences of others provides us with an understanding that other texts cannot provide. According to Taylor they ‘give us new categories to understand life, a new sense of human possibility, and of the important choices which we have to make’ (p. 298). Unlike Nussbaum, however, Taylor does not limit his discussion of narratives to fiction. He recognizes the importance of other nonfiction stories such as ‘reading about certain historical figures’ (p. 298).

7. In fact, a study by Koopman (2015) found that life narratives brought about higher levels of
empathic distress in readers compared to literary narratives, which was ‘against expectation’ (p. 438).

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