



LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING

We can only grow our students, our teachers, and our own wellbeing, connectedness, awareness, agency, and mastery if we are thoughtful and intentional about how humans best learn. Our studies of transformational classrooms reveal five “healthy tensions” in great learning experiences.

What conditions and experiences enable students' and teachers' growth and development as collective leaders?

OVERVIEW

Get started with a preview of the headlines coming out of our studies of transformational learning conditions.

DISCOVER

Virtually explore **transformational learning experiences** to find distinguishing principles and conditions shaping them.

LEARN

Explore the **five “healthy tensions”** that show up in most transformational learning experiences.

DO

Find actionable guidance and examples of teachers and partner organizations implementing those learning principles.

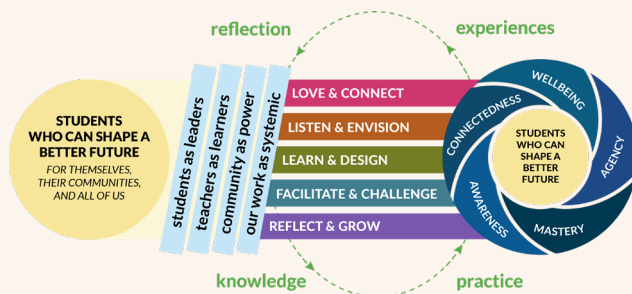
SHARE

Share and explore incoming insights, challenges, questions, resources, and research.



OVERVIEW

We can only grow our students', our teachers', and our own wellbeing, connectedness, awareness, agency, and mastery if we are thoughtful and intentional about how humans best learn. Our studies of transformational classrooms reveal five "healthy tensions" in great learning experiences.



If we want students to learn differently, then teachers must learn differently. If teachers are going to learn differently, they may have to unlearn some of what they think they know about learning.

Laurelin Whitfield
Leadership Coach and Facilitator, Teach For All



DISCOVER

What learning principles was Teach For Nepal using in 2018 to help new teachers recognize the limitations of their perspective and learn from students and communities?



What learning conditions enabled Óliver Jabato Rodríguez to let go of his fear of failure, transforming how he saw his students and himself? Explore the question in this video from 2018.

DO

- Apply these insights through Training and Coaching and four powerful "learning bets" for teacher development: Exploring, Discovering, Examining, and Experiencing.
- Check out innovations across the Teach For All network.
- Explore adult learning and development more deeply through examples and resources.

LEARN

- Shifting lenses often calls for disorienting experiences and reflection that drives "unlearning," while developing skills often calls for watching, listening, and practicing.
- Shifting lenses and developing skills and actions can be part of a powerful cycle of unlearning and learning.

FIVE HEALTHY TENSIONS FOUND IN MANY TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Learning experiences are simultaneously ...

<p>WELCOMING <i>ensuring safe inclusion for all identities</i></p>	<p>&</p>	<p>DISORIENTING <i>dismantling assumptions that inhibit growth</i></p>
<p>COLLECTIVE <i>learning with and from each other</i></p>	<p>&</p>	<p>PERSONAL <i>learning in our own best way</i></p>
<p>DIRECTIVE <i>communicating, showing, and telling in clear and accessible ways</i></p>	<p>&</p>	<p>EXPLORATORY <i>questioning, exploring, and discovering in unexpected ways</i></p>
<p>STRUCTURED <i>building in planned and predictable ways on what is known</i></p>	<p>&</p>	<p>RESPONSIVE <i>adjusting to address learners' curiosity, questions, and confusion</i></p>
<p>REFLECTIVE <i>gaining awareness of ourselves and others</i></p>	<p>&</p>	<p>ACTIVE <i>applying, practicing, and creating</i></p>

FIVE CRITICAL INSIGHTS INTO HOW WE LEARN (THAT WE ARE CONDITIONED TO IGNORE)

We have to overcome systems that inhibit deep learning...

1. As learners we actively *construct knowledge*, but we are conditioned to believe we are *mostly passive* recipients of knowledge.
2. We are *never not* learning, but we are conditioned to believe learning only happens in formal settings like school.
3. Our receptivity to *different kinds of learning* changes as we develop, but we are conditioned to believe we are all equally ready to learn in the same ways.
4. "Unlearning" IS learning, but we are conditioned to assume that "learning" only means gaining *new* insight even though deconstructing old ideas often leads to the most important growth.
5. Feeling *safe, trusted, and free* to be ourselves makes us most receptive to learning, but we are conditioned to believe pressure and intensity should drive learning.

SHARE

Contribute your insights and see others' questions, resources, and challenges to evolve under learning about learning.

DISCOVER

(Re)visit transformational classrooms, looking for learning principles

Often, we visit transformational classrooms to learn from the teachers' and students' perspectives and actions. Too rarely do we focus on the qualities of the learning experiences that are enabling both students' and teachers' growth and development.

Do you remember Teach For India teacher [Gaurav Singh's profound realizations](#) about himself and his students as he worked alongside these students' families, sorting through garbage? We first shared this story from 2009 as an illustration of a critical shift of lenses that radically changed Gaurav's approach to classroom leadership. **But what was it about that experience that encouraged that lens shift?** The learning theory in that story centers around disorientation and reflection, rather than reading, watching, or practicing.

In this sense, what can we *learn about learning* from our virtual visits with transformational teachers, students, and classrooms?

Discover Through Personal Reflection

Let's start, just as Gaurav did, by reflecting on our own journey of growth and development. Use your experiences as case studies for learning about learning. Take a few minutes to pause and think about each of these scenarios and questions.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE *gaining new knowledge or skills*

Think about an experience when you learned something new or gained a new skill really effectively. What was the experience? What was it about the experience that allowed you to learn so much?

DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCE *gaining new capacities and perspectives*

Think about an experience when your understanding or view of yourself, of others, or of the world shifted in a meaningful way. What was the experience? What was it about the experience that enabled such a significant shift in your understanding or perspectives?

Discover Through (Re)visiting Transformational Classrooms and Communities

Below you will have the chance to revisit some of the classrooms and communities from our collective studies that helped generate key insights into purpose, lenses, strategies, and outcomes in transformational classrooms. Now, however, focus on the conditions, qualities, and principles shaping the design and implementation of the students' and adults' *learning*. What assumptions are they making about the kinds and qualities of experiences and interventions that drive growth and development?



A Collective, Contextualized Vision

As shown in this [video](#) from 2018, Teach For Nepal helps teachers see the importance of recognizing the limitations of their own perspective as they strive to work alongside communities to develop a vision for students. What learning principles is the organization using to inform these new teacher experiences?

GLOSSARY

Transformative Classroom: Classrooms where students seem to be on a different trajectory. They seem to be making dramatic progress in their wellbeing, connectedness, awareness, agency, and mastery. That growth is transforming their paths and opportunities going forward.

THE POOR STATE OF RESEARCH ON TEACHER TRAINING

Research into how to best develop teachers' ways of being, knowing, and doing is frustratingly weak.

The Brookings Institution examined "[What Do We Know About Professional Development?](#)" and organized researchers to review the evidence on the effectiveness of in-service teacher training and support in math. The study found that only 32 of 910 studies were based on reliable study design and that only five of the 910 studies met the standards of the "What Works Clearinghouse" (a respected consolidator of education research). Of those five studies, two interventions had positive results, one showed limited effects, and two showed no discernable benefits for teachers.

As Ben Jensen, an expert in teacher development in Australia, said at Teach For All's 2016 "[Learning Bets](#)" Roundtable, "the evidence is disgustingly poor."

And where we do have evidence about teacher training, it is showing marginal impact, at best. In The New Teacher Project's (TNTP) disturbing review of the effectiveness of teacher training and support, the data showed that in one site "if you were to play forward [the teacher growth seen in these studies] at what point will the average teacher in this site be highly effective in developing students' critical thinking skills? It would be 172 years."—[The Mirage](#)—The New Teacher Project.

In the words of Michelle Rhee, Teach For America alumna and former head of The New Teacher Project:

The measures that we traditionally use to assess teacher professional learning, which is largely teacher satisfaction with it and whether they think they are growing across this data set, have virtually zero relationship to actual improvement. Repeat: The things that we generally make our decisions on are almost completely unrelated across these settings to whether teachers are showing improvement on the "objective" measures. There's no way to overstate this; the research base on teacher improvement is just disturbingly bad and not instructive.



Collective Ownership and Student Leadership

What learning conditions enabled Óliver Jabato Rodríguez, while he was a fellow in 2018, to [let go of his fear of failure](#), transforming how he saw his students? How did the learning conditions that enabled his development show up for his students?

Co-constructing a Learning Community

Focus on the learning theory in Pooja's classroom shown in this 2018 [video](#). What principles shape how she plans lessons and partners with students to develop a vision for their classroom and community?

Critical Thinking for Mastery

Taylor Delhagen, Teach For America alumna, is not using a traditional "I do–We do–You do" lesson design as he [facilitates debate](#) to develop students' critical thinking. Why? What learning theory is at play in this classroom?

Too often, as we study who is doing what and why in transformational classrooms, we are missing the underlying learning theory that is driving students' and teachers' growth and development. What patterns do you see in the *qualities and conditions of learning* in these classrooms and communities?

Spoiler alert: The next section (after this quick look at the weak state of research on teacher professional development) shares what others have learned about learning from these and other transformational classrooms.

LEARN

Disruptive learning about learning

Transformational growth and development require that we unlearn what we have learned about learning. We must design learning experiences around healthy tensions that represent a radical departure from common approaches to teacher development.

Let's imagine for a moment that you want to become a master chef, someone who makes meals so incredible that they change people's lives. What learning experiences would help you get there?

- You could read about great cooking.
- You could watch great cooks in action.
- You could practice small elements of great cooking and gradually put them together.
- You could spend time with a transformational chef, picking up skills, knowledge, and mindsets with increasing responsibility.
- You could fuel your desire to learn by tasting excellent food and seeing first-hand the influence of great cooking on diners.
- You could get a cooking coach who would watch you work and give constructive criticism as you work.
- You could get a different cooking coach who helps you analyze your own cooking and discover ways you want to improve it.
- You could develop relationships with your diners and listen carefully to what actually makes them feel most inspired and fulfilled by your cooking.

All of those are legitimate "bets" to grow your culinary skills. But it might not be the best choice to pursue all these bets at once. Would you learn faster if you focused on a few strategically chosen learning experiences and invested heavily in them? Would it depend on how developed you are as a cook? Would it depend on your personal learning preference? How should you decide which learning experiences would work best?

Teaching As Collective Leadership offers a map of purpose, lenses, actions, and outcomes that distinguish classrooms where students are growing as leaders of a better future. But knowing the map is *not enough*.

Even the clearest map of what we want to be, know, and do does not tell us how to grow and develop those qualities.

Does a list of traffic laws and illustrations of good driving make someone a good driver?

NO, because driving knowledge needs to be applied and practiced to develop the skills and judgment of good drivers.

Does a well-formatted map of the science of nutrition and exercise turn someone who is unfit and unhealthy into someone who is fit and healthy?

NO, because that kind of lifestyle shift requires a combination of self-reflection, self-awareness, support, unlearning old habits, and practicing new ones.

Does the Teaching As Collective Leadership framework of purpose, lenses, strategies, and outcomes make a new or struggling teacher great?

NO, because developing the purpose, lenses, and strategies described in this framework requires intentionally designed learning conditions and experiences.

Teaching As Collective Leadership is emerging from collective studies of transformational classrooms around the world. All the insights in the model are what a diverse group of people see as patterns in those classrooms. We have also been studying the growth journeys of the teachers in those transformational classrooms. How did they develop into the collective leaders they are today?

GLOSSARY

Leaders of a better future: This concept emerged years ago when Teach For All hosted a collective, year-long reflection process among students, teachers, teacher developers, CEOs, community leaders, and families about the aims of our network. One clear theme in those conversations was the changing and challenging world today's students are inheriting, and the need for education to prepare them to face and improve that future for themselves and others.

[I hear and see us] conflating what we know about good teaching, which is quite a bit, with how we help teachers become effective at those things. Knowing and helping aren't the same things. It [feels like we] might be making the leap to say if we know/understand something, we can get teachers to do it. That's exactly where I worry that we know less than we think! Most places are completely absent, actually, of a theory of learning. And as a result, they do a set of activities that ... very often have little to do with how we actually support people to do the work of teaching.

Anonymous feedback from Teach For All's Roundtable of veteran program designers on [Learning Bets: Growing Transformational Learners and Leaders](#)

This chapter merges what we are learning from those teachers and their classrooms with key insights from the frontiers of adult learning and development research. This chapter offers a guide to designing learning experiences for teachers and students that will strengthen meaningful growth and development.

Three Big Ideas About Learning Theory

Learning theory is a complex field at the intersection of neuroscience, cognitive development, psychology, sociology, pedagogy, etc. Three important sets of ideas are emerging as we ask a diverse group of teachers, students, families, teacher coaches, and others to describe the conditions and principles shaping transformational learning experiences:

1. **Most education systems are built around, and have led us to internalize, assumptions and beliefs about how we learn that are fundamentally wrong.**
2. **Transformational learning experiences are designed to marry together five "healthy tensions."**
3. **While they call for different learning theories, shifting tensions and growing skills are inextricably intertwined.**

In this section, we will explore each of those three emerging insights about learning theory.

Big Learning About Learning #1

Most education systems are built around, and have led us to internalize, assumptions and beliefs about how we learn that are fundamentally wrong

At the risk of sounding a little dramatic (or like conspiracy-theorist trolls on the internet) *much of what you have been led to believe about learning is a scam.*

Many of the assumptions, conditions, and principles that shape conventional classroom "learning" have been driven not by genuine alignment with how humans grow and develop to fulfill their potential but instead by what is convenient and efficient for a system preparing students for an industrial and factory era.

Imagine for a moment what pressures a system aiming for assimilation, conformity, and efficiency of mechanical learning puts on *how* learning experiences are designed. In that system, we might isolate children from each other by putting them each behind their own desks, rather than letting them work together. We might (just hypothetically, of course) create a culture of competition and fear, where children are afraid to make mistakes. We might define learning (just hypothetically, of course) as what teachers tell students, instead of what students actually internalize and master.

Many of us have deeply internalized false and damaging assumptions about how we learn, misconceptions about learning that will, unaddressed, inhibit our ability to help our students grow as leaders of a better future. For many of us, learning about learning must start with unlearning about learning.

Here are five foundational insights about how humans (students and teachers) learn, grow, and develop that our school experiences have conditioned us to ignore.

Key Idea #1

As learners we actively construct knowledge

but we are conditioned to believe we are mostly passive recipients of knowledge

Most of us (as students) experienced classrooms in which the teacher talked and we were supposed to listen and learn. Those systems reinforced the misperception that learning is *received* instead of constructed. And yet, advances in the science of learning and development have underscored that human beings "learn best when they are socially interacting within an authentic situation that is relevant to their prior knowledge and goals, and that fosters autonomous and self-directed functioning." (Doolittle & Hicks, 2012, p. 86)

The implications for teachers and students are immense. Students are not empty vessels in whose minds we pour knowledge; students are active agents always deriving meaning from what they experience. What will it mean to help new teachers discover and construct new understandings, perspectives, and skills that will help students do the same?

Key Idea #2

We are never not learning

but we are conditioned to believe learning only happens in formal settings like school

Whether we want them to or not, our minds are processing, sorting, connecting, discarding, and evolving how we understand the world around us every waking moment of every day and perhaps every sleeping moment as well. A problematic side-effect of the artificial compartmentalizing of education into the four walls of a classroom is an implicit devaluing of so many powerful sources of learning, from apprenticeships to lived experiences and the collective wisdom of the community. That misperception also overvalues the classroom setting, rather than seeing it as one aspect of the broader learning journey of students.

Again, the implications of this truth about learning are huge. How can we design teacher training and support experiences that connect learning in workshops and institutes to the real-world learning that comes with being a teacher in a classroom? How can we take a step back to see our work as educators as a contribution to the overall learning journey of students? And how can we connect the broader context and learning our students are experiencing to the objectives we have in our classrooms?



Key Idea #3

Our receptivity to different kinds of learning changes as we grow and develop

but we are conditioned to believe we are all equally ready to learn in the same ways

The developmental journey that is so easily recognized in children continues into adulthood. In some stages of our life, we are more open to learning in ways that develop skills and mastery, while in other stages we may be more open to shifts in identity and perspective. And while everyone's journey is unique, knowing that we go through different stages as adult learners helps us be more responsive and adaptive in designing training and support for adults (and that same responsiveness and adaptivity are what teachers are going to need to embody in their classrooms with their students).

How would our teacher development (e.g., Institute Design) and coaching models change if we embraced the reality that different adult learners may be at different stages of readiness to learn at different times? How would our classrooms be different? And how could modeling these principles in our teacher training and development impact how our teachers work with students in their classrooms?

GLOSSARY

Mastery: We use the word “mastery” to describe the meaningfully rigorous learning needed to prepare students for leadership in the future. The term signals a focus on deeper learning, surpassing many current education models and systems.

Grow students as leaders: We have chosen the verb “grow” in this phrase because we feel it’s more active and meaningful than more traditional terms like “develop.” We made this intentional choice to inspire readers to pause and think about the opportunity and responsibility we have to help students be prepared for a very different future than the one that shaped conventional classroom models.

Key Idea #4

Unlearning is learning

but we are conditioned to assume that “learning” only means gaining new insights even though deconstructing old ideas often leads to the most important growth

Most of us probably experienced formal education in which “learning” meant adding new facts or skills to our growing minds. Some of the most important insights, however, come when we critically examine and let go of previous assumptions about ourselves, others, or the world that, while once useful, are now inhibiting our own or others’ growth.

Perhaps we have internalized, for example, that a teacher is an all-knowing source of insights and that students are supposed to compliantly receive that knowledge. If so, teaching in ways that grow students as leaders of a better future will be very uncomfortable until we unpack and let go of those assumptions.

“Unlearning” often comes from disorienting experiences that, with reflection, help us make new meaning of the world around us. As Harvard researcher Todd Rose suggests in his book *The End of Average*, “The hardest part of learning something new is not embracing new ideas, but letting go of old ones.”

How are our approaches to teacher recruitment, selection, and training reflecting the misconception that learning does not include “unlearning”? How would teacher development and coaching be different if we were not only working to grow fellows’ teaching skills but also help them be more aware of assumptions they have internalized about themselves or others that are inhibiting their development?

Key Idea #5

Feeling safe, trusted, and free to be ourselves make us most receptive to learning

but we are conditioned to believe pressure and intensity should drive learning

Meaningful learning requires not only being comfortable with trying new things and making mistakes but also the mental processing capacity to make sense of those experiences and mistakes. When our minds are in a protective “fight or flight” mode (which is so often the case for children and adults who have experienced or are experiencing trauma) meaningful learning is significantly inhibited.

The implication for teachers (and teacher trainers) is clear: creating and protecting a welcoming space for all, especially people with marginalized and oppressed identities, is an essential part of designing learning experiences. This means that if we want meaningful learning to happen we have to proactively work to mitigate oppressive stressors around and inside us.



Big Learning About Learning #2

Transformational learning experiences are designed to marry together five “healthy tensions”

Those realities about how humans best learn serve as a foundation for the conditions and qualities of learning experiences that actually help us (and our students) grow and develop. As we have studied the growth journeys of transformational teachers across and beyond our network, and as we have married those stories and experiences with expertise and research into adult learning and development, several key qualities of transformational learning experiences have emerged.

We are finding it useful to express these insights as “healthy tensions,” ideas that at first seem in conflict with each other but together actually make for powerfully provocative learning experiences when married together. Meaningful learning comes from a pair of interdependent yet opposite qualities, and both are necessary for learning to happen. The point is not that a workshop or lesson plan should have one or the other of these qualities, but that learning should have both, even though the two qualities might feel in tension with each other. In fact, these healthy tensions fuel learning.

These polarities are “yin and yang”—not good versus bad. In this sense, they are interdependent opposites, not a spectrum.

Below, we will explore four of these five healthy tensions in strong learning experiences:¹

Welcoming

Ensuring safe inclusion for all learners and identities

Powerful learning experiences welcome the full being of those who are taking part and the diversity of all those who are present. The science of learning is verifying what we intuitively know: If we don't feel safe, and if we don't feel a sense of belonging, a host of chemical responses in our brains and bodies inhibit our ability to learn. When learning experiences are welcoming we see:

Learning experiences feel respectful, such that learners feel safe and affirmed in their identities, learning preferences, and needs.

Learners reveal and address gaps in understanding or skills without fear of undermining their reputation or position.

Learning is structured to provide multiple access points with varied learning modalities, and/or individualized support.

&

Disorienting

Dismantling assumptions that inhibit growth

Powerful learning is to some degree uncomfortable and disorienting. It may push us to the edges of what we know and/or can do. It may push us to confront our own biases and assumptions. It may challenge us to see the world in new ways. When learning experiences are disorienting we see:

Learners are working at the frontiers of their knowledge, skills, and/or perspectives.

Learners are discovering new things about themselves.

Learners are recognizing blindspots they didn't realize they had.

1. These polarities are informed by our collective studies, partner organizations' input (especially Teach For America's position on adult learning), as well as other key resources on adult learning and development, including;

- Dirkx, John. *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*
- Jensen, Eric. *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, 2nd Ed. 2005
- Villegas, Ana María and Lucas, Tamara. *Educating Culturally Responsive Teachers*

Collective

Learning with and from each other

Human beings are social learners. We learn best with people who see and support our journey, who can stretch and challenge us, and who surround us with diverse perspectives and ways of thinking. Dialogue, connection, and collaboration are at the core of growing collective leadership. When learning experiences are collective, we see:

Learners learn from and with each other via spontaneous and organized structures.

All learning, whether by individuals or groups, contributes to our collective impact.

&

Personal

Learning in our own best way

Our individual needs as learners vary enormously. Temperament, identity, culture, and prior knowledge and experience all influence our receptivity to and preferences in learning. Powerful learning experiences respect and nurture those differences with elements of personal choice and autonomy. When learning experiences are personal, we see:

Learners have space to influence how they experience learning.

Learners find relevance to their lived experiences and interests in the process and content.

Directive

Building on what we and others know in planned and predictable ways

Learners appreciate direct, guided instruction to achieve clear objectives, and new insights built from prior knowledge. Predictable and familiar models, templates, and protocols for designing and hosting learning experiences can help learners feel comfortable and help us avoid “reinventing the wheel.” When learning experiences are directive, we see:

Learners become familiar with learning processes so they can focus on content.

Learners know what to expect for their invested time and energy in learning.

&

Exploratory

Questioning, exploring, and discovering in unexpected ways

Learning is a process of discovery, of making meaning, of constructing our own understanding of the world. Learning experiences can be powerful when they create opportunities for learners to make up their own minds, put the pieces together for themselves, and practice agency in the learning process. Play and experimentation in this discovery process bring learning to life. When learning experiences are exploratory, we see:

Learners have a choice and voice in what and how they learn.

Learners are prompted to connect new learning with prior knowledge/experience as they make meaning for themselves.

Learners explore concepts and build skills in areas that align with their interests, their roles, and the problems they currently face.

Learners are involved in assessing their learning and experience.

Reflective

Gaining awareness of ourselves and others

Learning happens when we make new meanings of ourselves, others, and the world. Powerful progress comes from intentionally processing our experiences. Reflective learning is critical to gaining awareness of internalized beliefs and assumptions that might enable or inhibit our growth. When learning experiences are reflective, we see:

Learners pause, taking time to process and make meaning of challenging, uncomfortable, or disorienting experiences.

&

Active

Applying, practicing, and creating

Learning happens when we experiment, act, and do. Intentionally practicing new skills, trying out new ideas, and going through trial and error can make powerful progress. Practice is critical to building skills and capacity. When learning experiences are active, we see:

Learners emulate exemplary models.

Learners break down complex skills into discrete elements and practice them.

Learners build “muscle memory” for foundational skills to free their minds to focus on difficult judgments.

Imagine a learning experience with one of these qualities but not the other. A learning experience that is safe and welcoming but not at all uncomfortable or disorienting is probably not much of a learning experience at all. Sadly, too many students (and too many of us) have experienced a class that was highly uncomfortable or pressured but not at all welcoming. How did that affect our ability to learn and grow?

We are finding that the key to designing exceptional, meaningful, transformational learning experiences is to think “and” not “or” when it comes to the healthy tensions.

Consider the “Welcoming & Disorienting” polarity. Imagine you are designing a training session on the purpose of education for new teachers. We know that learners are most receptive to learning when they feel safe and secure to take risks and fail, so you may be thinking about how new teachers with marginalized identities will feel, see, and experience the space, the exercises, you, and others. At the same time, we know some degree of discomfort or disorientation is a driver of deeper learning. So you may also be thinking about how you can help learners see ways that they have internalized unjust purposes baked into education, and to feel some discomfort in that. As a designer and facilitator of learning experiences, you need to ask yourself, “Are my learners encountering both of those qualities in this learning experience?”

Note that these interdependent opposites are what we want learners to experience, which could be different from what we emphasize in designing and facilitating. That is, sometimes one side of a polarity may already be strongly present in the broader context in which learning takes place, so we do not need to design for that quality. For example, if new teachers are arriving at your training session already pretty uncomfortable and disoriented from the struggles of their first day of teaching, you may want to design toward the “welcoming” side of the polarity because its interdependent opposite is already part of the learners’ experience. These polarities should guide us to think about *what our learners are experiencing*.

Big Learning About Learning #3

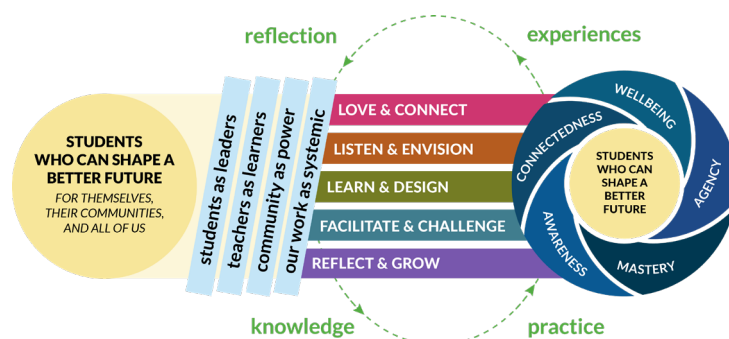
While they call for different learning theories, shifting tensions and growing skills are inextricably intertwined

Not only do most teacher development models reflect widely held misconceptions about how people learn and grow, but they are also largely built around developing knowledge and skills. How can we help new teachers quickly learn to plan lessons, to manage their classroom, and to assess learning? How can we help teachers master the literacy strategies, chemistry formulas, or history themes they are teaching?

Our interviews with transformational teachers about how they have grown and developed suggest that skills and lenses develop differently but interrelatedly.

As we flagged in the chapters on [LENSES](#) and [STRATEGIES](#), while it is a bit of an oversimplification, it is helpful to note that skills and actions are often (but not exclusively) developed by watching someone model and practice them. By contrast, lenses most often shift when we have disorienting experiences or relationships and have the opportunity to reflect and make new meaning of those experiences and relationships.

And, as crudely illustrated in the (oversimplified) visual below, shifting lenses and developing skills can be part of a powerful, interrelated cycle of development. Experiences give us fodder for reflection, which yields new learning and knowledge that we can then practice to create new experiences.



Realizing that skills and mindsets change and grow differently was a big deal for me. I had sort of lumped them together, but skills are often built by engaging exemplary models, breaking things down into pieces, and practicing over and over. On the other hand, shifting mindsets or perspectives often requires disorienting experiences and intentional reflection. Recognizing those distinctions changed how I thought about my daily learning and growth, and how I thought about institute design and coaching in a world where our lenses, perspectives, and mindsets are just as or more important than our actions.



Steven Farr

Teach For All's Global Learning Lab and Teach For America Alumnus

DO

Applying transformational learning theory to teacher development

These insights about what learning conditions best help teachers and students grow have profound implications for pre-service training, teacher coaching, and professional development.

Training Sessions & Coaching

How might teacher training and support be different when we are more intentional about learning theory? Here are some possibilities:

TRAINING SESSIONS

ARE MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN ...

- Learners are examining provocative case studies and discovering key insights themselves.
- Learners are exchanging resources and ideas related to concrete relevant challenges.
- Learners have autonomy in choosing key learning questions and how to address them.
- Learners are working in consistent groups to build trust and vulnerability.

ARE LESS EFFECTIVE WHEN ...

- Learners are told what to know and learn (instead of giving the opportunity to self-construct learning).
- Learners do not see a clear connection between objectives and learning and their actual challenges and needs.
- The ways of operating in the group learning space reinforce oppressive power structures or preference for some voices and perspectives at the expense of others.

ONE-ON-ONE COACHING

IS MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN ...

- The learner and coach develop a strong enough relationship for the learner to feel **welcomed** and **safe** enough for challenging and **disorienting** conversations.
- The coach collaborates with the learner, customizing and personalizing insights based on the learner's needs and contexts.
- The coach is leading with ways to leverage the teacher's strengths before offering actionable guidance for areas of growth.

IS LESS EFFECTIVE WHEN ...

- The coach focuses on only tactics and skills or only on mindsets and lenses without being intentional about matching coaching to learner's needs and purpose.
- The coach focuses only on areas for improvement and not leveraging learner strengths.
- The coach does not make time for connecting with the learner as a whole person.

Four Common Powerful “Learning Bets” for Teacher Development: Exploring, Discovering, Examining, and Experiencing

Designers and facilitators can mix and match the five “healthy tensions” described in the previous section in many different ways to create rich learning experiences for their learners. Consider four approaches that we often see strong learning facilitators use, whether the learners are children or adults. These four “learning bets” are not offered as a recipe or checklist, but as examples of what intentionality in learning theory looks like in action.

Exploring

Synthesized insights

Using summarized overviews of ideas (in articles, books, videos, PowerPoint slides, etc.), learners read, hear, or watch synthesized insights, react, and begin to consider implications. This is a relatively straightforward and perhaps “conventional” approach, but this approach can nonetheless be implemented in alignment with the four polarities. How are the content and its presentation both welcoming and challenging? How are you, as the learning designer and facilitator, building in personal choices for reflection within the collective, common experience of watching this video?

- Using *Exploring Synthesized Insights* with your audience and contexts calls for a quick and direct approach. This is a relatively easy way to align messages with a big group and kick off a conversation in a short amount of time. This learning strategy is great for an audience seeking “basics.”
- The downside of this direct approach is that learners will engage less deeply and may be less likely to shift behaviors as a result of the learning experience.

Discovering

Insights with provocative case studies

In this approach, we build learning around the cognitive science that humans “construct” knowledge, not just “receive” knowledge. In this approach to learning, learners explore provocative case studies (video, stories, etc.) or experiences (science experiments in a lab) to discern and construct for themselves key ideas and insights. The polarity of Directive & Exploratory is particularly obvious in this approach. Still, we can also design these “discovery” learning experiences in ways that are both reflective and active, collective and personal, and welcoming and disorienting.

- Use this approach to help students, teachers, and others experience key ideas and their sources simultaneously. Learners are much more likely to act on insights they “see” and discover themselves.
- This approach requires a little more time and collaborative space than directly providing the insights. And people may not discover what you want them to discover, and see something new (which is often the best part).

Examining

Personal experiences for insights

Through reflective prompts and exercises, learners consider what they’ve read, done, felt, or experienced in their own lives to make meaning of insights. We sometimes call this “internalization by personalization.” We might, for example, explore student leadership outcomes by asking new teachers which outcomes were valued in their classrooms growing up, and how that shapes the new teachers’ reaction to those outcomes. This approach is a powerful example of the intersection of Collective & Personal polarities, allowing learners to connect to the uniqueness of their own story and experience, while also building solidarity and shared purpose as a community of learners.

- This approach is especially useful to trigger unlearning (identifying and deconstructing internalized misunderstandings and misassumptions). And internalization through personalization naturally draws out personal connections and relevance to the learning.
- This approach may require a more relational, trusting, and inclusive safe space for people to be honest about personal connections. And, it is hard to predict how much time learners will need.



Experimenting With applying insights

In this approach, learners apply and experiment with new ideas and insights. This is a learn-by-doing approach that especially emphasizes the Reflective & Active polarity. Imagine, for example, new teachers identify three actions on the TACL strategy grid that they believe would align with their personal strengths. And then they go into their classroom (or into a role-play scenario) and “try on” those actions with learners. What worked? What didn’t? How did applying those actions feel? What were the results?

Designers and facilitators should not forget to pair space for reflection (Why am I trying out these actions? What shift and learning am I experiencing?) with the real-world applications of the ideas.

- *The action orientation of this learning strategy makes this a great approach for learners who are eager to see the implications of what they are learning.*
- *True application and experiences often take time, so this approach may be best for longer-term learning experiences.*

Keep in mind that any given learning experience could have elements of each of these strategies, while some learning experiences may center mostly around just one of them. The point of this list is to encourage intentional choices as you consider the learning polarities and your learners’ aims, contexts, time, and prior knowledge.

How Partner Organizations in the Teach For All Network Are Innovating with Learning

Some partner organizations in the Teach For All network are applying these principles in their teacher training and support programs with innovative and powerful results for teacher training. What innovations are you or your organization experimenting with?

Here are some examples of the trends we are seeing as partner organizations are more intentional about learning theory:

- **More Metacognition In Training and Support Initiatives.** Just like in transformational classrooms, when we look at organizations maximizing the growth of their educators, we see a more explicit focus on learning itself. Adult learners are asked to engage with the concepts of learning theory to understand why various learning bets are being made. *Teach For America, for example, developed an internal certification program to support staff understanding and application of adult learning theory, metacognitive practices in facilitation, and education for liberation.*
- **Recognition of New Educators as Sources of Learning for Each Other.** Reflecting the Welcoming & Disorienting and the Collective & Personal polarities, we see partner organizations’ increasing emphasis on strategically organized cohorts of new teachers as problem-solving sources of insight.
 - *Enseña Por México adopted a model called the “DIA method,” in partnership with another non-profit, that is built on the premise that teachers who learn from each other by figuring things out will help students do the same.*
 - *Teach For India instituted “learning circles” in which fellows build strong relationships with each and bring challenges to the group for collective support. Teach For America – Colorado has all but eliminated traditional coaches in favor of group problem-solving and support.*
- **Embracing Uncomfortable Experiences and Failures as Learning Opportunities.** In the spirit of Directive & Exploratory, Structured & Responsive, and Welcoming & Disorienting, we see partner organizations’ increasing focus on visceral experiences and close relationships as ways to question and change mindsets and perspectives. Whether or not we share the experiences and identities of our students, these experiences can be powerful triggers for deep learning. *Teach For India asked its fellows to work alongside the parents of one of their students for a day.*

- **Putting Relationships at the Foundation of Fellows' Learning Experience.** All of the learning principles depend on a sense of belonging and trust that liberates learners to try, fail, and grow. We see, across the network, institutes and programs being evolved to create more opportunities for strong relationships among teachers and with members of the community. *Teach For America – Memphis underwent a radical overhaul that helped it move from the lowest ranking region on many measures of success to near the top. At the heart of that overhaul was a commitment that every teacher in the region would “be known.” That shift led to dramatic changes in retention, commitment, and joy in the cohort, and encouraged much more learning and interdependence among teachers and staff.*

We use group [work]. In groups, we try to add a layer to the [learning] structure itself, exploring the group dynamics and the collectiveness of the experience. We try to be more intentional about learning from different people with different experiences ... to hear different voices.

Staff Member
Teach For Bulgaria



Spotlight on Enseña Ecuador

Enseña Ecuador aims to work from a systemic change approach, through the development of the leadership of the main actors of an educational community (directors, teachers, students, parents) and the construction of significant alliances at different levels of the educational ecosystem. In this way, **collective leadership will be achieved in order to propose solutions to the main problems that prevent children and adolescents from realizing their full potential.**

Through an updated framework, Enseña Ecuador has defined five **learning principles** to guide the design and delivery of its training and support model in alignment with its identified purpose:

- **Diverse:** We learn from multiple contexts and promote different leadership styles, adapting to the different starting points and rhythms of people based on genuine curiosity.
- **Holistic:** We recognize that learning is integral and involves self-knowledge, individual reflection, and the socio-emotional, intuitive, creative, and intellectual development of each person.
- **Collective:** We practice learning that takes place through dialogue and empathy to value the diversity, knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of others, and we internalize this collective learning through conscious leadership.
- **Transformational:** We learn by maintaining an open mind to change in different scenarios that allows us to recognize needs in ourselves and in our surroundings in order to act and transform ourselves continuously and permanently.
- **Active:** We put learning into practice to co-create and accelerate individual and collective actions that drive community and systemic impact.

WANT TO TAKE A SELF-DIRECTED MINI-COURSE IN ADULT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT?



Hi. My name is Laurelin Whitfield. I was a teacher for many years before working at Teach For America and now Teach For All on issues of learning theory. I'm especially focused on adult learning and development. I am learning so much from experts (in neuroscience, cognitive development, etc.) and from practitioners (teachers and teacher coaches who are living these insights every day).

Over the years, I've realized that knowing what transformational classroom leadership involves is not the same as knowing how to help ourselves and others grow and develop those lenses and actions. If you're curious about this idea, I hope you will join me in an upcoming workshop or course on learning theory! And/or, you can explore some of my favorite resources below. I've divided them into two sets: Learning (how we learn new knowledge and skills) and Development (how we develop more mature, complex worldviews).

Laurelin Whitfield
Leadership Coach and Facilitator, Teach For All

Reading and reflecting on Learning

- Laura Rendón, [Sentipensante \(Sensing/Thinking\) Pedagogy](#) Chapter 1. In this chapter, Dr. Rendón describes how we might reimagine the agreements between teacher and learner to create learning experiences grounded in “wholeness, harmony, social justice, and liberation.”
 - *If you prefer to watch or listen... Dr. Rendón shares her philosophy of education, as described in the chapter, in [this keynote address](#). (30 min.)*
- John Dirkx, Transformative Learning Theory in the Practice of Adult Education. This [article](#) offers an important overview of some of the key ideas in transformative learning theory, the learning theory that, arguably, best aligns with our network’s mission.
- Paulo Freire is considered by many the godfather of critical pedagogy. See Freire’s influence at work in the philosophy of [Henry Giroux](#), as he discusses the idea that “all education is a struggle over what kind of future you want for young people.” (10 min.)
- Mai Trinh & David Kolb, Eastern Principles for Learning Wholeness. Experiential learning theory (ELT) sits nestled within the larger field of transformational learning (and informs a lot of our network partners’ program models). In [this article](#), Profs. Trinh and Kolb argue that while ELT “originated in the work of Western scholars, many of [its] theoretical principles have a decidedly Eastern orientation.” This article explores those connections in depth and proposes a new way of thinking about adult learning.
- Ellen Langer, Mindful Learning. In [this article](#), Prof. Langer explores three key myths about learning and how we might bring more mindfulness to our own learning and the learning experiences we lead for others.
 - *If you prefer to watch or listen... Hear Prof. Langer describe her approach to mindful learning on [this episode](#) of the “Leading and Learning” podcast. (30 min.)*
- Charlene Mutamba, 21st Century African Philosophy of Adult and Human Resource Education in Southern Africa. In [this essay](#), Ms. Mutamba describes a philosophy of adult education inspired by and relevant to Southern Africa and explores its applications to the workforce (read: staff and participants) development.

Reading and reflecting on Development

Start by grounding yourself in the core concepts of Adult Development Theory (ADT):

- If you prefer a clear and comprehensive “white paper” approach: Sandra Ellison, [Understanding Vertical Development](#)
- If you prefer a more visual “slide deck” approach: Dimitri Glazkov, [What the Heck Is Adult Development?](#)
- If you prefer to listen rather than read... In this episode of “Where Genius Grows,” host Gideon Culman interviews Bob Anderson, creator of one of the most widely used leadership assessments grounded in ADT, the Leadership Circle Profile 360, on the subject [Learning to Be Self-Authoring](#). (48 min. total or just listen to 6:46-31:57)

Then explore potential applications of ADT to our work:

- William Torbert, [7 Transformations of Leadership](#). In this recent update to his original, seminal article, Prof. Torbert looks closely at the leadership of Warren Buffet and Angela Merkl to explore how a leader’s “action logic” evolves over time and generates very different approaches to relationships and problem-solving.
- Aenslee Tanner, [Creating Conditions for Growth in Adult Development](#). We know adults do develop, but how can we help this happen (and maybe speed it up)? In this synthesis, Tanner and her colleagues in the Growth Edge network

attempt to identify the drivers of development most supported by current research.

- If you prefer to watch or listen... In December 2018, adult development expert Jennifer Garvey Berger spoke with the “Coaches Rising” podcast about [Uncovering the Deep Principles of Change](#). In this episode, Garvey Berger explains the different stages in detail, how they impact leadership styles, and why it’s important to recognize them for effective coaching to take place. *SIDE NOTE: I also highly recommend Garvey Berger’s book, [Changing on the Job: Developing Leaders for a Complex World](#) (grounded in theory but very practical if you want to apply it in coaching and leadership development work).*

End by exploring the frontiers of ADT, which originated in the West but is being reshaped by ancient wisdom and contemporary practices from the East and South.

- There is a treasure trove of ideas in [this book](#) from the 2019 First Integral African Conference. We’d especially recommend the section titled “Inclusion Towards Integration”, on pages 36-43, which looks at how the concept of *Ubuntu* and the practice of *Padare* invite a new understanding of the developmental journey. (“What does it take to become fully human?” starting on page 142 is another gem.)
- Spring Chen, [Evolution Toward Wholeness: Integrating A Holistic Paradigm into Adult Development](#). In this abridged version of [her longer work](#), Dr. Chen proposes a rethinking of ADT not as stages that one passes through, but as ways of being and meaning-making that is already and always available to us. Alternatively, listen to Dr. Cheng on [this episode](#) of the “Coaches Rising” podcast (84 min.).

Your life experience is also a rich source for learning about learning!

Spend a half hour reflecting on your own beliefs about the purpose of providing learning experiences for adults. What ideas comprise your personal learning theory? Given this, what beliefs do you hold about the role of the person leading learning? Capture your reflections on these questions in writing and be prepared to share them with others.

SHARE

Make your voice heard:

Help us evolve and improve these ideas and resources

Teaching As Collective Leadership is a collective effort. It has developed through contributions from thousands of people—teachers, coaches, students, families, researchers, and others from all around the world. Please join us in continuing to evolve this work by sharing your perspective.

Below is our “digital bulletin board” which we are constantly updating with the input of generous readers who share their ideas. Please take a moment to click [here](#) on our **Co-learning Padlet** to contribute your thoughts, questions, challenges, illustrations, and links.

LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING GENERAL INPUT

I think it shifted from “Don’t worry, I’ll do it,” to “I’ll not worry; you’ll do it.” I think that is a big shift that I have made in the last few years in terms of how I think leadership is developed. I feel like one of the biggest principles Teach For India did follow in our leadership development model was to challenge and build leadership. Ultimately, if I think about leadership development, I think it happens the most when you let people be in that challenge and figure things out for themselves.

Mansi Joshi

Teach For India

Personally, I think Constant & Spontaneous is a really vivid and helpful polarity to include for the reasons I outlined below. I can’t see a helpful way to merge it with Structured & Exploratory without diluting it in a way that makes it less helpful. So I’d replace S&E with C&S. I think it’s clearer, more helpful, and highlights the way of being element in our learning theory in a way that is less foregrounded in the other polarities we have. For example, it raises really interesting questions about how I develop the qualities of being constant and spontaneous, what makes that hard, what it looks like, etc. Of course, that then opens the possibility of a learning theory about our learning theory! 😊

Jude Heaton

Teach For All

Useful article “The Constant vs. the Adaptor” mirrors the argument to change to Constant & Spontaneous.

<https://hbr.org/2020/02/every-leader-needs-to-navigate-these-7-tensions>



Contribute to our “Digital Bulletin Board” by sharing your thoughts, questions, challenges, validations, illustrations, and links by creating a note in our Co-learning Padlet ([here](#)).