

Migrant Women English Instructors' Transformative Workplace Learning Experiences in Post-Secondary English Language Programs in Ontario, Canada

Justine Jun

Abstract—This study aims to reveal migrant women English instructors' workplace learning experiences in Canadian post-secondary institutions in Ontario. Migrant women English instructors in higher education are an understudied group of teachers. This study employs a qualitative research paradigm. Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory is an essential lens for the researcher to explain, analyze, and interpret the research data. It is a collaborative research project. The researcher and participants cooperatively create photographic or other artwork data responding to the research questions. Photovoice and arts-informed data collection methodology are the main methods. Research participants engage in the study as co-researchers and inquire about their own workplace learning experiences, actively utilizing their critical self-reflective and dialogic skills. Co-researchers individually select the forms of artwork they prefer to engage with to represent their transformative workplace learning experiences about the Canadian workplace cultures that they underwent while working with colleagues and administrators in the workplace. Once the co-researchers generate their cultural artifacts as research data, they collaboratively interpret their artworks with the researcher and other volunteer co-researchers. Co-researchers jointly investigate the themes emerging from the artworks. They also interpret the meanings of their own and others' workplace learning experiences embedded in the artworks through interactive one-on-one or group interviews. The following are the research questions that the migrant women English instructor participants examine and answer: (1) What have they learned about their workplace culture and how do they explain their learning experiences? (2) How transformative have their learning experiences been at work? (3) How have their colleagues and administrators influenced their transformative learning? (4) What kind of support have they received? What supports have been valuable to them and what changes would they like to see? (5) What have their learning experiences transformed? (6) What has this arts-informed research process transformed? The study findings implicate English language instructor support currently practiced in post-secondary English language programs in Ontario, Canada, especially for migrant women English instructors. This research is a doctoral empirical study in progress. This study has the urgency to address the research problem that few studies have investigated migrant English instructors' professional learning and support issues in the workplace, precisely that of English instructors working with adult learners in Canada. While appropriate social and professional support for migrant English instructors is required throughout the country, the present workplace realities in Ontario's English language programs need to be heard soon. For that purpose, the conceptualization of this study is crucial. It makes the investigation of under-represented instructors' under-researched social phenomena, workplace learning and support, viable and rigorous. This paper demonstrates the robust theorization of

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English instructors' workplace experiences using Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory in the English language teacher education field.

Keywords—English teacher education, professional learning, transformative learning theory, workplace learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS study investigates the workplace learning and support experiences of Migrant Women English Instructors (MWEIs) in post-secondary English language programs in Ontario, Canada. The Transformative Learning Theory is a powerful lens for this study that will enable the researcher to investigate how MWEIs and their colleagues perceive their workplace environment, what transformative workplace learning experiences can be, what happens when instructors experience "perspective transformation" [1, pp.100-110], and how their colleagues and administrators impact their learning experiences. The theory guides all co-researchers in the study to use their critical self-reflective skills and experience critical discourse opportunities in this collaborative inquiry. The co-researchers will explore how MWEIs can re-examine and interpret their lived workplace learning experiences through the arts-informed case studies they create individually and cooperatively.

II. TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

A. Perspective Transformation

Mezirow [1]-[3] developed Transformative Learning Theory in the 1990s that has influenced a substantial body of research in adult education. It has helped scholars, especially in adult education, understand how adult learners cope with problematic situations in which they encounter conflicting perspectives and dilemmas they cannot resolve with their existing perspectives. According to this theory, these situations need to be critically re-examined. The person's perspectives should change into another form in order for the person to feel comfortable about the new situation and view themselves as a confident community member again. Mezirow called these perspectives "frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives)" [2, pp.61-62] that are sets of assumptions and expectations and named this shift "perspective transformation" [1, pp.100-110].

According to the Transformative Learning Theory [1]-[3], adults gradually develop perspectives about the social phenomena they experience, the people around them, and their

relationships, and make sense of their experiences based on those perspectives. The perspectives include attitudes, beliefs, opinions, values, judgments, criticism, and other value thoughts and ideas. The perspectives which Mezirow called “taken-for-granted frames of references” [2, p.59] also include “distorted assumptions, ungrounded beliefs, or warped perceptions” [4, p.53], “stereotyped attitudes and practices, occupational habits of mind, ..., moral-ethical norms, ..., and aesthetic values and standards” [2, p.59]. Adults make meanings of their unique experiences within the circumstances they understand, utilizing their old, new, and changing perspectives. When adults experience unmatched perspectives, the “problematic frames of reference” inevitably require transformation [2, p.58]. Adults seek alternative views that can be “more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” [3, p.26]. Mezirow argues that only when individuals reach adulthood can they develop the ability to reflect on their thinking and behavioral decisions and can assess their own reasoning about their habitual expectations [5, p.2]. The interactions and communications with others critically influence individuals’ perspective shifts while adopting new or adjusted interpretations of human experiences.

B. Habits of Mind & Points of View

Two concepts featured in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory are essential in this study: (1) *Habits of mind* and (2) *Points of view*. Mezirow [6] highlights that people can try on other people’s points of view and change their points of view too, but they cannot try on other people’s habits of mind [6, p.21], [7, p.118]. Habits of mind are the habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in a broad and abstract sense [8, p.92]. Habits of mind are how people’s mind works when categorizing their experiences, beliefs, and people around them, distinguishing themselves from others, or when differentiating thoughts, feelings, and actions based on their rules, criteria, standards, values, and dispositions [8, p.93]. Everybody holds habits of mind within their mind in an invisible form, whereas people can articulate their points of view in a conversation expressing their thoughts, beliefs, value judgments, and attitudes [8, pp.92-93]. Hence, people can easily understand other people’s points of view through

dialogues and can share feedback on them while communicating with one another. Habits of mind are not articulated but exist in the human mind, programming their points of view. Fig. 1 demonstrates a person’s mind that comprises “frames of reference” [2, pp.61-62] consisting of habits of mind and points of view [8, pp.92-93]. These two concepts are particularly significant for data analysis. To answer the research questions about transformations, the researcher and the participants will critically probe what workplace learning experiences will have transformed as a result of transformative learning. Research participants individually and collaboratively explore the transformation they will have experienced, which cannot be predicted at this moment. The transformation can be their workplace relationships, professional conduct, their understanding of a particular aspect of workplace culture, or other forms of transformation they identify. Simultaneously, the researcher of the study examines if the participants will have transformed their habits of mind or points of view, or both, and how their frames of reference will have changed through the cases they collaboratively share. Regarding the transformational types of adult learning, Mezirow [6] has informed of four different types of learning that can occur as a result of transformative learning. Kitchenham [7, p.120] illustrates the learning types as in Fig. 2.

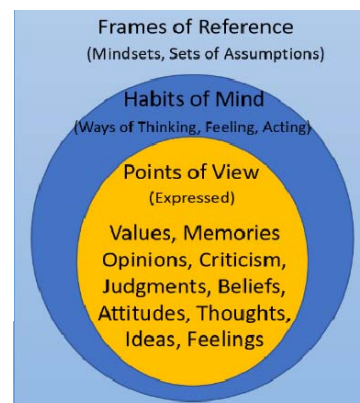


Fig. 1 Frames of reference embodying habits of mind & points of view

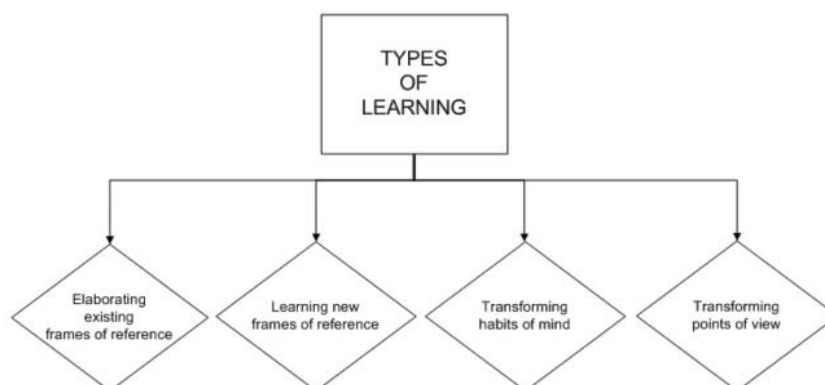


Fig. 2 Mezirow’s (2000) Four Types of Learning [6]

The learning types in Fig. 2 will be useful for the data analysis when determining which types of transformation the co-researchers will experience that they testify through this research.

C. Transformative Learning

Transformative learning requires two conditions: (1) *critical self-reflection*; (2) *critical discourse* [3, pp.96-97]. When adults experience a “disorienting dilemma” with conflicting perspectives [1], [5, p.4], [7, p.105], [9], adults consciously and critically reflect on their habits of “taken-for-granted ways of thinking” [8, p.102]. When they are ready with new or revised perspectives that they think are suitable for the context, they use human discourse as a tool for them to verify and validate those changed or revised perspectives [3, p.91]. Accordingly, adults experience transformative learning as a result of those thinking and communicating processes in which they can critically self-reflect on their assumptions and validate their new beliefs, intentions, values, and feelings [7, p.105], [8, pp.95-97], [10, p.197].

Cagney [5, p.7] explains the conditions for transformative learning as in Fig. 3.



Fig. 3 Conditions for a transformative learning environment

Although Cagney [5, p.7] included more elements in the conditions facilitating transformative learning, “critical reflection” and “dialogue” are crucial ones without which transformative learning cannot be understood [5, p.7]. According to Mezirow [3], adults consciously re-examine why they think, how they think on the unconscious level to dissect the automatic *Habits of Mind* existing in the deeper level of the mind through the critical self-reflection process. Mezirow [2, p.62] believed that the goal of adult education is to help adult learners enhance critical self-reflective skills although

they may develop the skills independently. For this reason, the role of an adult educator was regarded as important in adult education by this theory. Brigham [11] also applied this Mezirow’s stance of the “direct intervention by an adult educator” [2, p.62] to her arts-informed study. The researcher acted as an adult educator helping adult learners develop critical self-reflective and thinking skills necessary for their transformative learning. Habermas [12] is one of the scholars who considered human discourses as “optimal conditions for adult learning and education” [3, p.92]. Mezirow [3, p.91] asserts that adults utilize dialogues with community members as a tool for them to validate their emerging beliefs. In other words, adults test out their new and revised perspectives during the conversations with others in the relevant context in order to verify those newer perspectives. The “dialectic method of inquiry” is also critical for adults to understand the meanings of their lived experiences [3, p.91]. For this reason, adults require continuous exposure to diverse human experiences making them critically reflect on their experiences and inclusive dialogues founded on the “trusting relationships” among the community members to experience transformative learning [5, p.7].

Kitchenham [7, p.105] and Cagney [5, p.3] outlined the transformative learning cycle based on Mezirow’s [1], [3, p. 94] 10 phases of transformative learning. Table I [7, p.105] demonstrates the 10 phases of transformative learning and what adults experience in each phase. Cagney [5, p.4] divided those 10 phases (stages) into four sequential parts of a learning process as in Fig. 4.

TABLE I
TEN PHASES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Phase	Transformative Learning Process
1	A disorienting dilemma
2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4	Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated with a similar change
5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6	Planning of a course of action
7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8	Provisional trying of new roles
9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10	A re-integration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective



Fig. 4 The transformative cycle

Cagney [5, pp.4-5] explains the four distinctive parts of transformative learning as (1) *Experience*, (2) *Alienation*, (3) *Reframing*, and (4) *Re-integration*. The first part is (1) *Experience*. When adults encounter a “disorienting dilemma” [1], [9], “their construction of reality is challenged or not reinforced by sources around them,” and their sense of wellbeing is somehow damaged [5, p.4]. It is a disorienting event that usually becomes a person’s major life event that requires a change. Cagney calls it “a critical incident” [5, p. 4]. The second part is (2) *Alienation*. Adults start to critically re-evaluate their unexamined assumptions, expectations, beliefs, values, and understanding to revise the assumptions about themselves and others [5, p.5]. The third part is (3) *Reframing*. Adults begin to explore new perspectives and new meanings internally and externally. In this process, adults plan “a course of action” to implement their new beliefs while testing out new views, looking for others’ opinions, and actively searching for others’ agreements to develop a new understanding whether in one-on-one meetings or in group meetings [5, p.5]. The last part is (4) *Re-integration*. Adults re-integrate into their immediate environments with adjusted or changed perspectives and resulting patterns of action to reconnect and balance their being with others and their surroundings [5, pp.5-6].

Fig. 5 summarizes the transformative learning process that MWEIs in this study may experience in the workplace context based on Mezirow’s transformative learning theory.

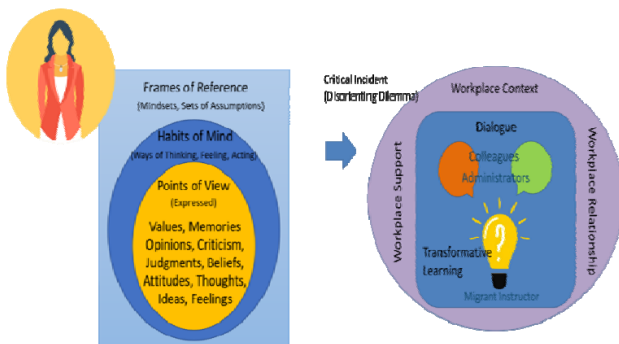


Fig. 5 MWEIs’ Transformative Learning

When adults encounter a “disorienting dilemma” [1], [9], “their construction of reality is challenged,” and their sense of wellbeing is somehow damaged because the people around them do not seem to support their meaning-making processes of the experience [5, p.4]. It is “a critical incident” [5, p.4]. “Not all learning experiences are transformational” [5, p.7]. Thus, the research participants are asked to select significantly meaningful learning moments at work in which they noticed their existing perspectives were not precisely the same as their colleagues’ or administrators’ perspectives in the context and attempted to readjust their thinking to sustain the relationships with them in that specific workplace or workplace situation. According to Cagney [5, p.7], trusting relationships and support among the people who share the dialogue in the critical incident are crucial for an adult to construct

meaningful critical discourses that can result in transformative learning, as shown in Fig. 5. For their critical self-reflection, the participants may ask themselves the following questions:

- What points of view do others have? What points of view do I have?
- Why do I think differently? Why do others think differently?
- What is the rationale behind that thought, that opinion, or that value?
- How do I want to see this difference?
- Do I want to change my perspective? How? And why?
- What do I not want to change my value/opinion? Why not?

The duration of the critical self-reflection may vary depending on the individuals’ characteristics, backgrounds, or workplace circumstances. Once they start developing their newly adjusted or transformed perspectives, they would engage in a critical discourse setting again to validate their changing perspectives. Mezirow [3, p.91] has informed that the “dialectic method of inquiry” is crucial for adults to understand the meanings of human experiences. Therefore, the participants should be able to critically reflect on their critical incidents in which they experienced critical self-reflection and critical discourse, as in Fig. 3, and this study is also designed to foster critical self-reflection and critical discourse during the data collection process (see Fig. 6 - Research Process). Based on this theoretical underpinning, the research participants as co-researchers:

- reflect on the transformative learning moments they experienced in the workplace,
- express those experiences through arts while answering the research questions,
- engage in the collaborative interpretation of the artworks,
- critically reflect on what their learning experiences have transformed,
- critically reflect on what has transformed by participating in this research process,
- engage in the collaborative interpretation of their self-reflective narratives, and
- engage in expressing their self-narratives independently.

III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS & APPLICATIONS

A. Critical Analysis of Transformative Learning Theory

The criticism that the transformative learning theory has mainly received is, as Taylor [13] identified, excessive focus on the cognitive and rational aspects of the people’s thinking processes while neglecting the emotional aspects involved in the learning process. Many theorists, including Cranton [14], [16] and Dirx [17], [18], are critical of “insufficient understanding of the emotional dimension” of transformative learning and advocated a Jungian approach as an improved way of understanding adults’ transformative learning [19, p. 332]. Mezirow [6] acknowledges the importance of the affective, emotional, and social aspects of transformative learning [5, p.2], [7, p.110]. Mezirow [3, p.95] argues that the transformative process is “often a difficult, highly emotional

passage.” Other theorists such as Brookfield [20], [21] assert that transformative learning cannot be understood without the sociopolitical contexts. Mezirow [3, p.95-96, p.104] also argues that “influences like power, ideology, race, class, and gender differences and other interests often pertain and are important factors” but “exclusively focusing adult education on immediate contextual issues” would be “self-defeating.” Naturally, transformative learning theory has evolved into “a complex and comprehensive theory of how adult learning changes the way people think about themselves and the world” over the past three decades [5, p.2].

B. Applications of Transformative Learning Theory

In the Atlantic provinces in Canada, Walsh and Brigham [11], [22], [23] have conducted multiple arts-informed research studies and revealed the immigration and professional integration experiences of internationally educated women teachers of diverse subjects. Significantly, Brigham [11] used Mezirow’s transformative learning theory [2], [6] to frame her five-year arts-informed study with 24 women teachers in two maritime provinces. She examined teacher participants’ transformative learning experiences that arose during the arts-based workshops that the researchers offered. Her findings have confirmed that arts worked as theoretically appropriate and emotionally supportive research tools that encouraged research participants to use their imagination and critical self-reflective thinking skills to effectively exhibit their transformative learning moments. The two teachers’ vignettes that Brigham [11] describes demonstrate the teachers’ perspective shifts such as how they viewed themselves, the world around them, and the relationships between themselves and the world while engaging in meaningful discussions with other participants in the workshops and interpreting the meanings of their artworks in group meetings.

Brigham’s [11, p.48] arts-informed study not only displayed “a structural shift in consciousness” during the discussions with the participants but also it proved that the arts-informed research process effectively acted “as a shuttle between the unconscious and the conscious” and between the cognitive and the affective dimensions. The research process enabled participants to journey from their awareness of the new contexts to their deep understanding of the meanings of their lived experiences as a whole. Brigham [11, p.38] confirms that “these dual processes can be best supported through the arts.”

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

This section demonstrates what Mezirow’s transformative learning theory has informed this study, enabling the researcher to examine a group of under-studied research participants who may not have fared well in adjusting to the Canadian workplace context and their experiences. The scholars who have studied migrant English teachers have advocated equity and inclusivity for migrant teachers regarding their employment and professional working environments by problematizing terminologies, systemic discrimination, and “othering” [24] practices in the workplace [25]-[29]. Schmidt and Janusch [27, p.149] asserted that

“positioning IETs as little more than economic assets is unjust.” Instead, these scholars urged that migrant teachers needed to be viewed as “passionate educators, advocates, and leaders” [27, p.149]. This research study offers MWEIs equal opportunities to reflect and examine their own experiences as legitimate data and analyze their data as co-researchers. For instance, all the co-researchers have control over the topics they choose to explore to answer the research questions, decide which types of artifacts they would like to create, and what meanings of the artworks they would like to contribute to the data analysis. Literature has not provided the definition of Canadian workplace culture yet. The findings of this study can illustrate how Ontario’s current workplace cultures may transform and what workplace support means to migrant English instructors in post-secondary institutions in Ontario, Canada.

Brigham’s study [11] guides this research in many aspects. However, this study uses a slightly different approach from Brigham’s. While Brigham took the researcher-as-an-adult-educator perspective, the participants in this study also take the researcher’s co-researcher roles. One of the research aims is to provide the research participants, under-represented women instructors, with opportunities to voice their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and leadership in a research study rather than to play a traditional passive role as research subjects. According to Cagney [5, p.2], “the end goal of transformative learning is the achievement of greater personal autonomy and independence.” The co-researchers will engage in this study as independent thinkers who will determine what topic they decide to explore, which medium of expression they are inclined to use, and how they prefer to contribute to the data analysis. They are decision-makers of their own case studies. The researcher of this study takes the role of facilitating the research environment where critical self-reflection and critical discourse are possible. All the co-researchers will be the judges of how transformative this study becomes as well. The findings of this research will contribute to the development of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory not only limited in the adult education field but extended to the English teacher education field.

A. Research Questions

Transformative learning theory informs appropriate methods for this study to explore the research questions about workplace learning and support experiences. The research questions are:

- 1) What have MWEIs learned about their workplace culture, and how do they explain their learning experiences?
- 2) How transformative have their learning experiences been at work?
- 3) How have colleagues and administrators influenced their transformative learning?
- 4) What kind of workplace support have they received? What supports have been valuable to them, and what changes would they like to see?
- 5) What have their learning experiences transformed?

6) What has this arts-informed research process transformed?

B. Research Methods

Mezirow and other scholars [30] recommended useful research methods for researchers to foster critical self-reflection and critical discourses through their collaborative inquiry with women doctoral students at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York [3, pp.102-103]. The methods are critical incidents, life histories, journal writing, media analysis, repertory grids, metaphor analysis, conceptual mapping, action learning, collaborative learning, and others [7, p.103]. Among those methods, the researcher applies critical incident reflections, artwork creation, journal writing, and arts-based collaborative learning opportunities. This study will not depict MWEIs' overall stories of professional integration,

life histories, and immigration experiences. Instead, it will picture what their transformative workplace learning moments look like. This study aims to facilitate a collaborative and cooperative research process that can offer the participants "direct and active learning" experiences based on "trusting relationships" among them [5, p.7]. The arts-informed photovoice method will create a collaborative inquiry process. This research is designed in a way that critical reflection and critical discourse processes are incorporated into the research process. The participants can reflect on their individual critical incidents to share them with other participants, then collectively generate meaningful meaning-making conversations as part of the research procedure that will also become their professional learning opportunities. Fig. 6 describes the research process.

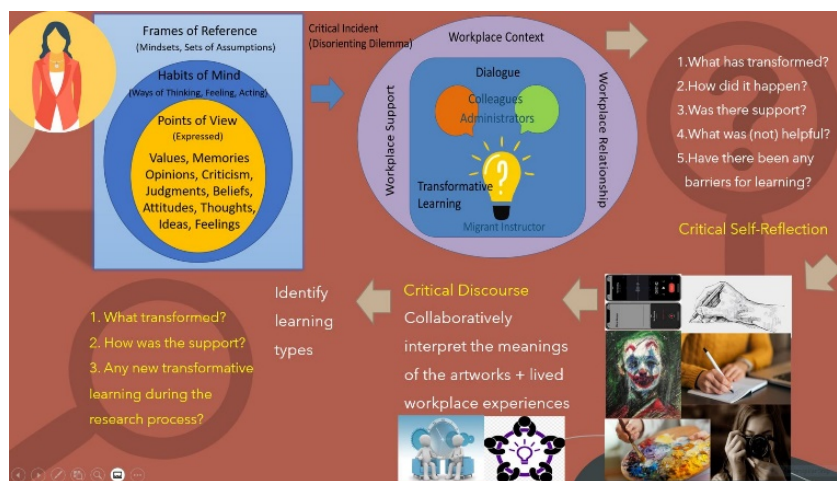


Fig. 6 Research Process

The participants will recall and select their critical incidents of choice where they experienced perspective transformation. The learning is about the workplace culture that they newly learned through the interactions with their colleagues or administrators at work. The workplace situation should be associated with a dialogue with their colleagues or administrators, and it can include nonverbal communication skills such as gestures, facial expressions, or body movement. They critically reflect on their transformative learning experiences inquiring the five key areas: (1) What has transformed? (2) How did it happen? (3) Was there support? (4) What was helpful and not? And, (5) Have there been any learning that occurred during their participation in this research?

The co-researchers express those meanings through their artworks of choice while answering the research questions. The artworks include photographs, audio or video recordings, paintings, drawings, or other art forms they prefer. They will then engage in the critical discourse settings with the researcher and other voluntary participants as the next step. Finally, all the co-researchers critically reflect on what has transformed due to their learning experiences at work, if they

have experienced transformative learning during the research process, and if so, how it happened.

V. SUMMARY

The primary purpose of this study is to focus on investigating MWEIs who work with adult learners in the post-secondary English language programs in Ontario who have rarely been studied by scholars in the education field. MWEIs' transformative learning experiences in the workplace are the central research area of the study. The researcher and research participants will critically examine the MWEIs' workplace learning and support experiences collaboratively. They will critically reflect on their transformative learning moments associated with their colleagues and administrators throughout the research process and express those moments in the art forms they prefer including photography. The collaborative inquiry process of this research will offer the research participants critical discourse opportunities while reflecting on their workplace discourses that they used for their professional learning environments. Finally, all the co-researchers will revisit the primary question about how transformative their workplace learning has been for them,

what has transformed within themselves and in their workplace practices, if this arts-informed research study will have been transformative, and, if so, what will have transformed.

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Ms. Jun's strong interest in transformative learning of adult learners including teachers as learners has led her to apply Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory to English language teacher education and present her theoretical work at this World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology conference community. She has been a member of American TESOL, Mexico TESOL, Korea TESOL, TESL Canada, and TESL Ontario. She is a TESL Ontario certified TESL trainer and TESL Canada certified ESL instructor. Currently, Ms. Jun is working as a graduate research assistant at OISE and teaching assistant at the University of Toronto. She pursues contributing to enhancing more equitable and inclusive English teacher education and support programs for migrant English instructors in Canada.