

Beyond the Buzzword

Deconstructing "Transformative" WIL through a Multi-Focal Identity Lens

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UBC Vancouver:

The research framework was formed at UBC Point Grey campus, located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam).

Northeastern University Vancouver:

Northeastern University's Vancouver campus, where we work, study, and learn, is situated on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples: the x^wməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

TRU Kamloops:

We gather today at TRU's Kamloops campus, on the traditional and unceded lands of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc within Secwépemc'ulucw, the traditional territory of the Secwépemc people.

Goals

1. Reframe "transformation" in WIL through an identity lens (Illeris, 2013), and distinguish between progressive, regressive, and restorative transformation.
2. Apply Gee's (2000) N-I-D-A taxonomy to analyze the multiple identities students bring into WIL and career contexts.
3. Interpret résumés and cover letters as identity artifacts that carry students' histories into the workplace.
4. Use concrete advising prompts to recognize and respond to the identity work shaping students' becoming.

Call to Support International Graduate Students

*International graduate students are often subjected to a "**maturity myth**" the institutional assumption that they are fully formed, autonomous professionals requiring minimal holistic support.*

I'd like to challenge that.

In reality, they are novice and expert at the same time in different fields, with various developmental needs calling for specialized support.

From “what students need to learn” to what practitioners need to see & support

I draw on a theoretical framework composed of

1

Transformative Learning

Mezirow · Illeris · Dirkx

What it means to transform individually and societally, and what are conditions for transformative learning

2

Identity Taxonomy in Education

Gee, 2000

Analytical lens: Nature, Institution, Discourse, Affinity

3

History-in-Person

Holland & Lave, 2001

How students' histories sedimented into dispositions

01

Transformative Learning

and what transforms

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Transformation as a floating signifier

POLICY LEVEL

Transformation = marketability

A bridge between academic mission and economic mandate. Used to justify restructured funding and the vision of life-ready, work-ready citizens for a future-proof institution.

PERSONAL LEVEL

What comes to mind?

When WIL transforms a student, where do you see changes in them? What changes?

Making career decisions

Confidence

Purpose

Increased confidence

Well-being

Sharing something they learned from a coffee chat or other experience

Belonging

Maturity, Comfort in new settings

Self-agency in career choices

self awareness and confidence; able to articulate empowered hope and clearer direction for their future

Feeling good about their future self

Getting interviews and job offers

understanding self and better knowing others

Less mental changes in some of the



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Learning outcomes of transformative learning

Worldview

- Assumptions, Beliefs, Attitudes, Expectations
- Ways of Interpreting Experience
- More Comprehensive or Complex Worldview
- New Awareness / New Understandings

Self

- Self-in-Relation
- Empowerment / Responsibility
- Identity / View of Self
- Self-Knowledge
- Personal Narratives
- Meaning / Purpose
- Personality Change

Epistemology

- More Discriminating
- Utilizing Extra-Rational Ways of Knowing
- More Open

Ontology

- Affective Experience of Life
- Ways of Being
- Attributes

Behavior

- Actions Consistent with New Perspective
- Social Action
- Professional Practices
- Skills

Capacity

- Cognitive Development
- Consciousness
- Spirituality

Hoggan, C. (2016). *A typology of transformation: Reviewing the transformative learning literature. Studies in the Education of Adults, 48(1), 65–82*

Transformative learning as identity change

Transformative learning is learning that implies a *qualitative change in the identity of the learner* (Illeris, 2013); when learning reaches deep enough to disturb inner identity layers, requiring a restructuring of the self to maintain psychological balance.

Transformation is often celebrated as progressive, but it is not always.
Making sense of non-learning or learning resistance

Meet Ada

Our engineering co-op student from Iran

Ada is technically exceptional. A mid-term site visit reveals the central dilemma: Ada stays quiet in team meetings, expecting hierarchical direction. When the supervisor asks, *"What do you think we should do?"*, Ada considers their viewpoint insignificant (*"I must not have the full picture"*) and doesn't want to sound arrogant. Listening and humility are qualities they want to embody.

- *What could happen next? As promisingly or as poorly...*
- *How do you see "identity work" in the provided trajectories?*

Progressive transformation

After a few tries encouraged by the supervisor, Ada's voice in meetings is validated. The supervisor mentors Ada: a valid answer is a well-reasoned one with the information you have. You can be both open to new information and demonstrate your thought process. This prompts Ada to reflect on authority, expertise, and voice, and to further develop a more differentiated view of professional agency in which their own judgment is a legitimate input. Humility is reframed not as silence but as the capacity to reason openly and revise in dialogue. They can still feel authentic in doing things differently.

Authenticity is not rigidity. It is expressing the same values (humility, reasoning, and openness) in new forms at different places.

Regressive transformation

The team's business culture is fast, performative, and built on "bro" rapport. Ideas land by being said first, said loudly, and said with confidence. Ada's slower, more deliberate contributions get lapped in meetings. Their behind-the-scenes work is absorbed into the team's output without clear attribution because they don't claim ideas or network around them. Over weeks, Ada's confidence tanks as they feel small and inferior for having "incomplete skillsets". They stop offering opinions even when prompted. They over-invest in technical deliverables and disengage from the social and strategic dimensions of the workplace. They reject the possibility of being a leader and instead position themselves as tech specialist.

What looks like a choice is an identity defence: not risking being “lesser than”.

Restorative transformation

Same dilemma as before. Ada tries, stumbles over a half-formed answer, and withdraws with the conviction they will never fit in. They decide to just do the work assigned and finish the co-op without seeking further recognition. This brought them inner peace to carry on without crying every night..... A month later, they are loaned to a different team that needs extra support. In meetings, team 2's moderator pauses, makes space, and follows up with "say more about that". Ada gradually comes to consciousness that the problem wasn't their voice but the room's condition for it. They test a new framing in team 2: "here's how I'm reading this ... what am I missing?" It lands well. Encouraged, they debrief with their co-op advisor to re-engage with team 1. They try it with partial success. Even when their input isn't well received, they no longer read it as a verdict on themselves. They know they would survive and are more invested in seeking the right team to thrive on.

One student. One dilemma. Three trajectories.

- Conditions: whose communication norms got treated as universal, and whether anyone helped them make sense of the gap afterward.
- A “caring, safe AND challenging” disorientation for growth.
- Attention to relationships and emotional work (Dirkx, 2012)

02

The N-I-D-A Taxonomy

Four lenses for the identity work students do

James Paul Gee, 2000

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Four lenses on student identity



Nature-identity

A state I am in

Racialized body, neurotype, gender, age, in/ex-troversion, presumed accents and foreignness



Institution-identity

Position authorized

"International student", PGWP-eligible, student with disability (registered)



Discourse-identity

A trait recognized in interaction

"Articulate", "shows initiative", "technically excellent but not leadership material"



Affinity-identity

Allegiance to common practice

Peer mentor groups, religious communities, language-based affinity, hobbies

Analysis

The same trait can be viewed through multiple lenses.

"Being African American"

can be analyzed as...

- N** when biologized
- I** when institutions classify
- D** when others ascribe traits in talk
- A** when the person claims allegiance to shared practices

Think: Not category, but which powers are mediating this student's learning?

Group work: Case studies

In your handout:

1

**The engineering
leadership student**

2

**The MBA
scholarship student**

3

**The direct-entry
PhD prodigy**

4

**The "nerdy"
statistics student**

What surfaces across the cases

Equity-deserving students bear disproportionate identity work in the space.

THEMES WORTH NAMING

- 1 A "professional self" is sometimes demanded against the grain of who the students have been, are, and want to become
- 2 Institutional architecture is silently mediating, often narrowing, each student's options.
- 3 The cost of identity work is invisible to the institution but legible to the student.
- 4 The advisor sits at a junction — inside vs. outside the experience. Naming what is happening for students matters.

Multiple incompatible discourses

Students constantly negotiates which to foreground, which to suppress, and which to refuse.

Mushfake

Making do with limited resources to perform an identity not yet theirs.

For equity-deserving students, mushfake is doubly painful: not because of what they lack, but because they are forced to dim what they have already mastered.

03

History in Person

Past-present-future

Holland & Lave, 2001

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History as disposition

Students arrive at our offices already sedimented with history:

*Colonial
history*

*Family
migration
history*

*Schooling
histories*

*Gendered &
racialized
histories*

History-in-person names how durable struggles get carried in — not as memory, but as disposition in the present.

The artifacts

Where it all comes back to your desk

Résumé

**Cover
Letter**

**LinkedIn
Profile**

**Personal
Statement**

These are the materials through which a student mediates between their history-in-person and the world they are trying to enter in WIL.

What would you do differently?

Reflection prompts

How is a student's identity work shaping what they can hear, choose, and risk in our conversation?

Whose recognition counts, and what is the source of its power (e.g., institutional, discursive)? Am I treating any of these as if they were natural to the student?

Which assets of the student am I treating as deficits to be coached out of them?

What is mine to name for this student and what stays as theirs to navigate?

Thank you

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THE DILEMMA

Ada: an international student in engineering co-op

Ada is technically exceptional. A mid-term site visit reveals the central dilemma: Ada stays quiet in team meetings, expecting hierarchical direction. When the supervisor asks, “*What do you think we should do?*”, Ada considers their viewpoint insignificant (“*I must not have the full picture*”) and doesn’t want to sound arrogant. Listening and humility are qualities they want to embody.



PROGRESSIVE TRANSFORMATION

A disorienting dilemma triggers critical reflection on prior assumptions, producing a more inclusive, differentiated, and open meaning perspective (Mezirow).

After a few tries encouraged by the supervisor, Ada’s voice in meetings is validated. The supervisor mentors Ada: a valid answer is a well-reasoned one with the information you have. You can be both open to new information and demonstrate your thought process. This prompts Ada to reflect on authority, expertise, and voice, and to further develop a more differentiated view of professional agency in which their own judgment is a legitimate input. Humility is reframed not as silence but as the capacity to reason openly and revise in dialogue. They can still feel authentic in doing things differently.



REGRESSIVE TRANSFORMATION

Beyond coping capacity, the learner deadlocks or reverts to a less challenging stance to preserve psychological coherence. Students pull back or shut down (Illeris).

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RESTORATIVE TRANSFORMATION

The learner confronts the overwhelming situation and re-engages with growth. Students come back, make sense of it, and find a new way forward (Illeris).

Same dilemma as before. Ada tries, stumbles over a half-formed answer, and withdraws with the conviction they will never fit in. They decide to just do the work assigned and finish the co-op without seeking further recognition. This brought them inner peace to carry on without crying every night... A month later, they are loaned to a different team that needs extra support. In meetings, team 2’s moderator pauses, makes space, and follows up with “*say more about that*”. Ada gradually comes to consciousness that the problem wasn’t their voice but the room’s condition for it. They test a new framing in team 2: “*here’s how I’m reading this ... what am I missing?*” It lands well. Encouraged, they debrief with their co-op advisor to re-engage with team 1. They try it with partial success. Even when their input isn’t well received, they no longer read it as a verdict on themselves. They know they will survive and are more invested in seeking the right team to thrive on.

Perspective	Source of power	Core process	Example in WIL
Nature-identity (N)	Forces in nature or innate traits	A state I am in	racialized body, neurotype, gender, age, presumed accents and foreignness
Institution-identity (I)	Authority of an institution	Position authorized	"international student [on work/study permit]", black scholars [institutionalized initiatives], post-graduation work permit eligible, students with disability [registered]
Discourse-identity (D)	Discourse/dialogue of rational others	A trait recognized in interaction	"articulate", "shows initiative", "professional", "technically excellent but not leadership material", "data scientist", "Engineer-in-training", person with disability
Affinity-identity (A)	Shared practices of an affinity group	Allegiance to common practice	peer mentor-mentee, religious communities, language-based affinity groups, hobbies

1 The engineering leadership student

A 2nd-year Master of Engineering Leadership student. He managed multimillion-dollar infrastructure builds in Lagos for eight years before coming to Canada. Recruiters keep flagging him as “overqualified for entry-level”, but senior roles ask for proven leadership records in local contexts, leaving nowhere obvious to fit. He has begun quietly pulling his senior accomplishments off his résumé. Performing inexperience hasn’t moved him forward in two months, and it is steadily eroding his clarity on who he is in this market. He immigrated through an in-demand occupation stream, only to find he cannot find his place here.

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What Discourse is shaping the recruiters’ judgement of “fit”?

ADVISOR STRATEGY

How do you help him position himself without erasing what he carries?

2 The MBA scholarship student

A 1st-year MBA student on full scholarship. First-generation, from a working-class family. Her cohort treats Bay Street as the natural destination, but her family told her she has become estranged from them. They wanted her to pursue something more hands-on, the kind of work the family has built its survival on, and they don’t see a “talking” business job as honest work. A cousin recently asked if she is “still Black”, since she has stopped wearing her hair natural to look “professional” and spends most of her time with people outside their community to “network the way up”. She’s thriving on the outside but struggling from the inside.

NIDA LENS

Is a step toward the career a step away from her affinity community?

ADVISOR STRATEGY

How do you support a student to reconcile with the tension?

3 The direct-entry PhD prodigy

A direct-entry PhD student in Anthropology, 23 years old, on a study permit, just completed qualifying exams to start her dissertation proposal. She came straight from a competitive undergrad program, while her cohort is mostly students in their 30s to 50s: they have rich life experiences and know exactly what they want from the PhD. By comparison, she doesn't feel ready nor accepted for needing to figure life out. She feels like an imposter, experience panic attacks, and wants to pause — perhaps try internships to explore other pathways. Her family reads a long PhD as a sign of weakness and dismisses internships as distraction: “*why can't you just finish school fast and become a professor?*”. Meanwhile, since a PhD in her field already implies extended timeline, doing PhD internships requires extending her study permit at IRCC's discretion multiple times, which itself feels risky and exposed.

NIDA LENS

How is her developmental “clock” incompatible with the institutional “clock”?

ADVISOR STRATEGY

In the face of institutional barriers, what does an educator's work look like?

4 The “nerdy” statistics student

A 1st-year master's student in Statistics. Their coursework is excellent, and people know them as “the nerd”. They told their co-op advisor that networking events and informational interviews are debilitating. After encountering information about autism, they suspect they fit the profile, but they are scared to explore further. Pursuing a diagnosis feels like claiming a disability, with all the stigma that carries. They worry about IRCC implications for a future permanent residency application, and about employment discrimination down the line. Meanwhile, peers are landing co-ops. Cold applications are not getting interviews. The co-op advisor suggested a disability-focused career fair where no diagnosis is required and employers are actively interested, but they chose to cocoon at home instead.

NIDA LENS

How does neurotype (a natural feature) become institutional, discursive, or affinitive?

ADVISOR STRATEGY

What does informed advising look like? (each possible move carries its own set of implications)