

Levels of Learning A model by Peter Howie and Elizabeth Synnot

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Inc workshop held in Wellington New Zealand in January
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Levels of Learning is a working heuristic (rule of thumb) that is easy to use as both a reflective tool and a planning tool. Diz Synnot and I have been working with it in groups and on it from a theoretical perspective for many years. When combined with other sophisticated models of human learning and functioning it is one pointer to the variation of human experience and lend confidence to planning or analysis of learning situations.

| Levels | Colloquial | Knowles | Friere | Mezirow | Buddhist | Moreno | Clayton |
|------------------|------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------------------------|----------|------------------|-------------|
| Tertiary | Learning about/jargon | Knowledge | Transfer | Instrumental Domain | Knowing | Knowledge Centre | Head |
| Secondary | Learning how, know-how | Abilities | Transact | Communicative Domain | Doing | Action Centre | |
| Primary | Identity as | Attitudes | Transform | Perspective transformation | Being | Learning Centre | Heart, self |

Each column should be read from top to bottom. Each column is a theoretical worldview on its own. The presentation of each of these models in this one is a fit not made in heaven but works more or less well. The fact is that there are very few models of learning available that have anything like a concept of *depth* in learning. Peter is currently working to develop a conceptual model of deep learning by doing a philosophical analysis of Mezirow's model of Transformational Learning with Bigg's model of a deep learning process.

The levels work this way – primary level is deep or core learning, secondary is less deep and less core and tertiary has the least depth. Tertiary effects us least, secondary learning effects us much more and primary learning is life changing. This makes more sense when going down each column.

Colloquial: At the **tertiary level** we recognise this type of learning as learning about something, getting to know the words, the jargon and the ideas associated with some area of interest. At the **secondary level** we recognise this level of learning as learning how to do something, having the know-how to act and act appropriately. At the **primary level** it is having the identity that goes with the actions and ideas. So a person can know something but not know how to act. A person can know how to act but not understand when, why or under what conditions. If a person has the identity then even without all the knowledge or experience they can act appropriately. With the identity they can utilize their experience, their knowledge in a congruent fashion. In psychodrama training – the **tertiary level** learning doesn't help to produce dramas. Heaps of practice,

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secondary level learning can assist in developing fluidity with technique. When the identity of a director begins to form, **primary level** learning, then all the practice and knowledge starts to add up and make sense. When a person becomes in themselves a psychodramatist, for instance, then they can access their experience and their knowledge to maximise their work.

Knowles: Malcolm Knowles has been a seminal and influential researcher and adult educator. He tried to get adult educators to treat adults as different from children in how they learned. You may have experience some adult educational settings that still treat you like you are a child. He had some success. His model actually had different levels at different times - 5 one time and then 7 at another. He continually worked at it. He talked about knowledge (the **tertiary level**), abilities (the **secondary level**) and attitudes (the **primary level**).

Friere: Paulo Friere influenced generations of adult educators. He wanted adult educators to consider whether they were working for the best interests of their students. If teachers were only teaching their students enough to continue in servitude or serfdom then he challenged them to think further. So Friere considered teaching as an ongoing developmental experiment. He noted that teaching was often made up of transfer methods. That is methods that transferred ideas, knowledge or concepts from “jug to mug”, as though adults can open their heads and have knowledge poured in. This idea is still prevalent with a recent University advertisement in Australia having a student put a CD-Rom into a slot that came out of her head. This is **tertiary level** learning. At the **secondary level** of learning students interact in a transactional manner. This is usually accomplished through teaching that emphasises students working together on a common project. For instance setting up a school farm, a school radio station, setting up businesses where the transactional nature of the work leads to learning at many levels. At the **primary level** Friere wanted teachers to have students consider why they were learning what they were learning. He wanted students/adults to get to know the underlying economic and social values that stopped them considering a more abundant life. Remember that he was preaching in South America where much of the population was enthralled to wealthy land owners. He was concerned that teachers were in effect serving the wealthy land owners rather than the people working on the land.

Mezirow: Jack Mezirow coined the term *transformational learning* to describe changes he researched in woman taking up studies and other educational opportunities in their middle lives in the USA in 1978. It has a striking similarity the movie “Educating Rita” made in the late 80’s. His model has continues to develop and I’m not sure he would like to have it presented in this way. It is a bit of a retro-fit. The instrumental domain involves the understanding of “how things work” and how to manipulate the environment, including people, such as the arena of engineering, adult learning, trades, management, skills and other technical arenas – **tertiary level** learning.

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The instrumental learning domain relates to learning about cause-effect relationships, problem solving and meaning is created deductively through experimenting with the environment to become more effective in controlling it in a given problem arena. The communicative domain involves the relationships between people, how we communicate together, and present ourselves and generally how beliefs and practices of human communication occur.

The communicative domain includes “understanding, describing and explaining intentions; values; ideals; moral issues; political, philosophical, psychological, or educational concepts; feelings and reasoning.” (Mezirow 1991 p75). The communicative domain is where we learn about cultural and social group norms of behaviour and thought. It is where meaning is created through abductive reasoning, which is the process of using our own experience to understand another’s. Is this secondary level learning? Well all abilities or know-how require that we can act in a contextual manner and that falls squarely into this domain. Really some of this domain is tertiary as well – learning about how people operate but it is secondary level because it involves action and doing in the moment.

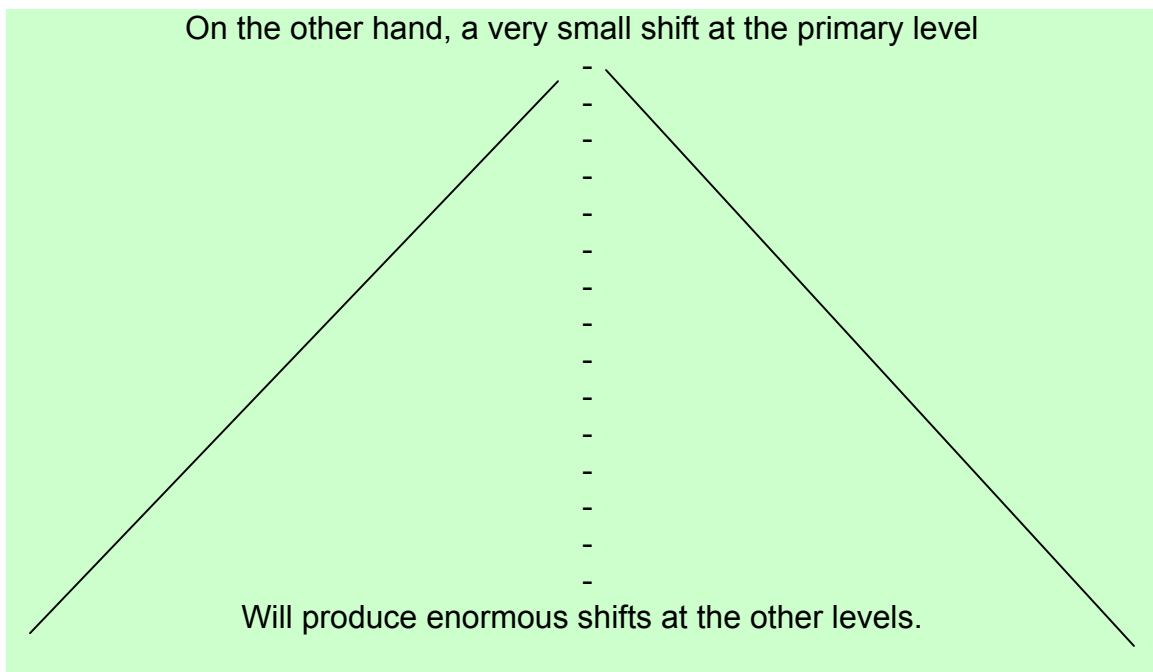
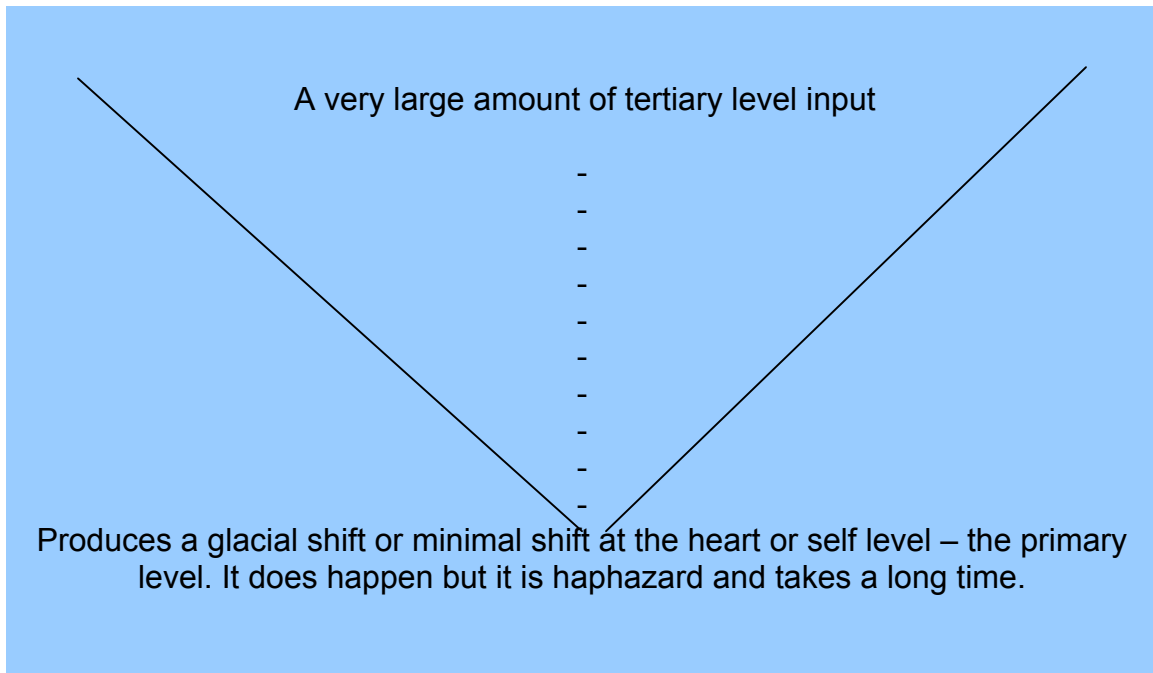
Perspective transformation is central to transformative learning. Perspective transformation is the element of transformative learning that occurs when a person shifts in one or more of their basic beliefs. Mezirow refers to basic beliefs as meaning structures that he calls *meaning perspectives*. A meaning perspective is the ‘structure of assumptions within which one’s past experience assimilates and transforms new experience’ (Mezirow 1991, p42). Hence, perspective transformation is an abbreviation for meaning perspective transformation. Meaning perspectives in Transformation Theory are synonymous with ‘personal constructs’, ‘perceptual filters’, ‘conceptual maps’, ‘metaphors’, ‘personal ideologies’, and ‘habits of expectation’ or ‘ideas about how the world works’ or ‘how the world works best’ (Mezirow 1991). More recently Mezirow has been using other synonymous terms more recognisable to lay people such as a ‘habit of mind’, a ‘perspective’, a ‘concept’, an ‘attitude’, an ‘outlook’, a ‘position’, a ‘way of thinking’, a ‘strongly held group of opinions or beliefs’, a ‘deeply held value’, an ‘identity’, a ‘worldview’ or a ‘point of view’ (Mezirow 2000). This is **primary level** learning. As I mentioned earlier, Jack Mezirow would not present his model in this way. He would include perspective transformation in each of the two domains – in this model of Levels of Learning it nevertheless fits when considered as learning related to depth. In fact it could be seen as an adjunct or extension of his model.

Buddhist: This is self explanatory. Knowing is **tertiary** and is related to knowing about things, the world, life, ideas, and dogma. Doing is **secondary** about being able to act and to do things. Being is the **primary** level and is related to who you are.

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Clayton: Max Clayton developed a model called the Cog Theory of Learning and presented it at a workshop I was attending some years ago.

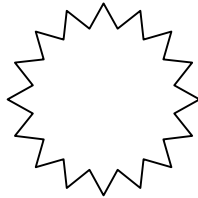
A very large change at the head level, that is, immense amounts of reading, listening, cogitating, considering, discussing may lead to a very small, insignificant or no change at the heart or self level



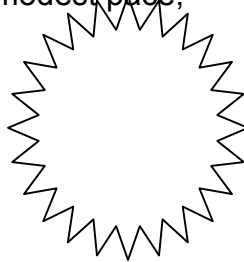
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Max produced this model using and calling it the Cog Model. The cog is used here as a metaphor for the disproportionate way the heart effects the head and not the other way around.

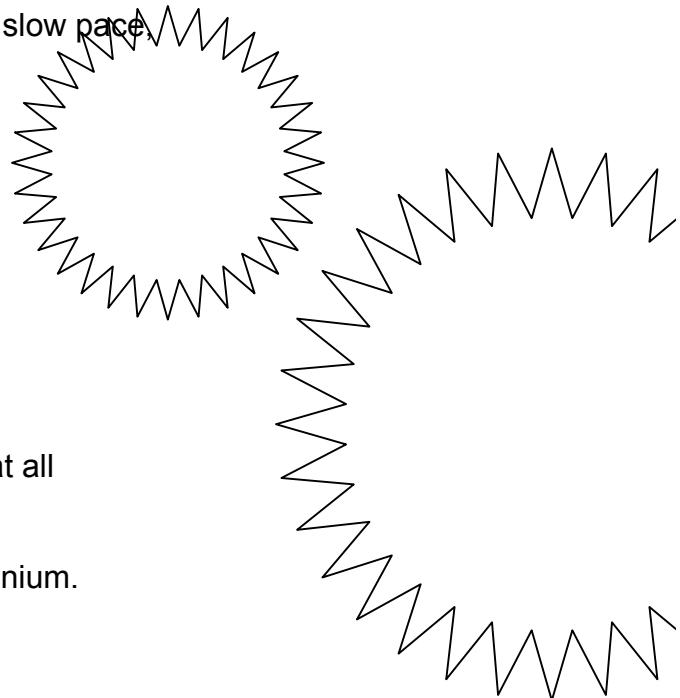
1 cm cog – turning really really fast,



Turns this 10 cm cog at a modest pace,



Which in turn rotates this 2 metre cogs at a very slow pace,

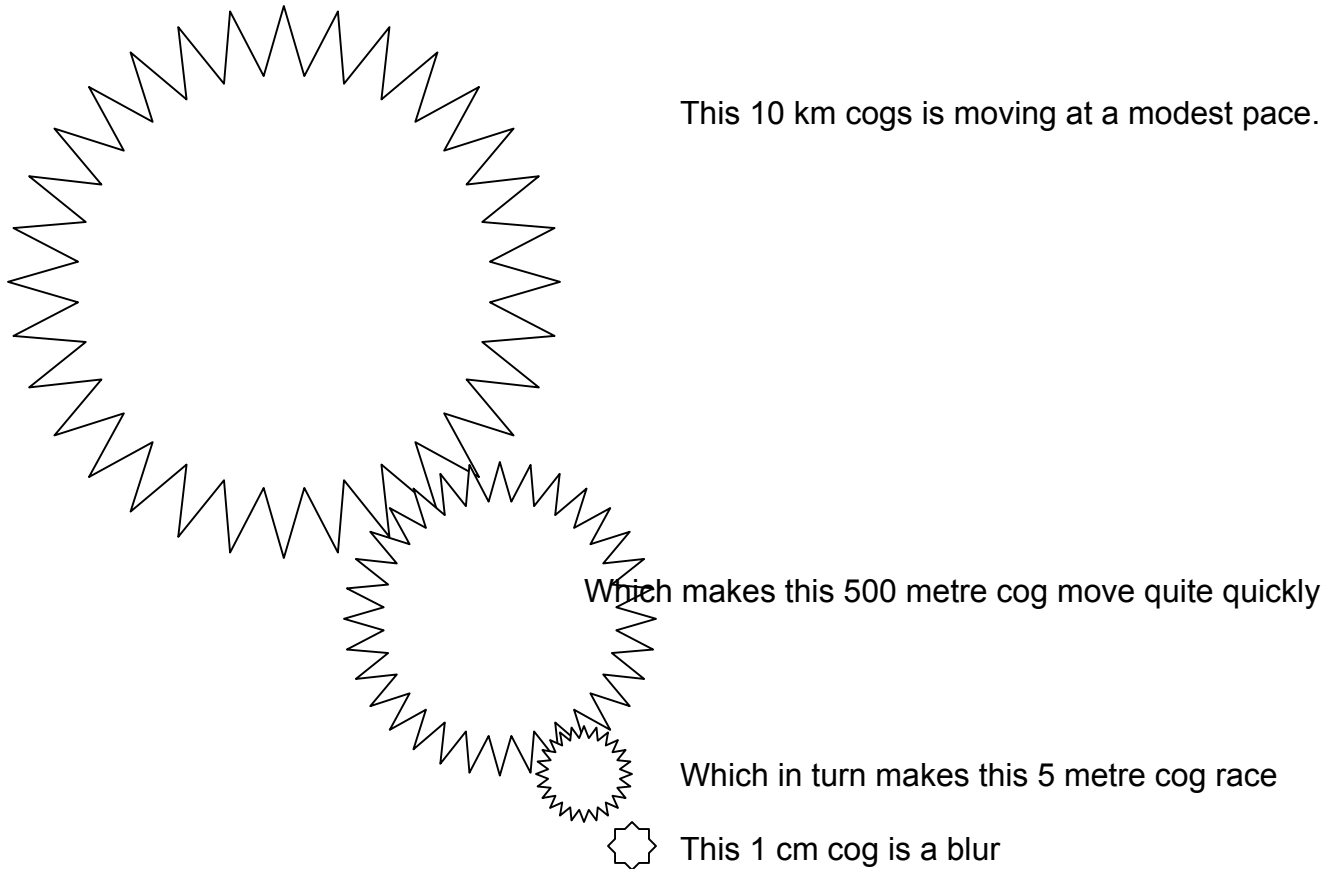


Which in turn rotates this 250 metre cog barely at all

And this 2 km cog is seen to move once a millennium.

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This is the head influencing the heart so that the heart changes. This is tertiary level learning. Primary level learning looks more like this.



When the heart is shifting, as it often does for instance in a psychodrama, the head can be profoundly effected.

Some general notes on this kind of model

1. In any group there will be participants learning at different levels at the same time. It would be a very rare occurrence where the whole group was learning at the primary level.
2. As a consequence of the previous note, it seems self evident that anytime someone says "Everyone here feels such and such..." or "Everyone here understands..." it is rarely if ever true. Usually the people expressing themselves in this manner are expressing their experience and projecting it onto others or seeing it reflected in others. It is usually so obvious to the people expressing themselves that they may not question their contention. Often it is more to do with trying to create something in the groups that supports their experience. It is often done in a way that is actually unconscious of the group's response.
3. While people may be in a learning group or a learning environment they may not necessarily be learning at all.

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4. Generally speaking most people are not reluctant to engage in **tertiary level** learning. In our culture in Aus and NZ tertiary level learning is seen as acceptable. Most of us can do it OK at least for a while. If this were not the case the Universities, private colleges and all manner of workshops could not exist. People are more reluctant to undertake **secondary level** learning and different performance anxieties often become animated. Most people are highly reluctant to learn at the **primary level**. This is because most of us are very wary of engaging in activities that might “change” us. At the **primary level** of learning our identity, our self is being effected. The crafting of a warm up that will encourage or allow us to learn at this level is an art. It must be authentic and adequate safety provided.
5. When going from tertiary to secondary to primary level learning, affect or feelings or emotions are engaged more and more. A leader who is wary of engaging their participant’s or subordinate’s feelings may take steps to minimise these expressions. This will, naturally, minimise the learning as well.
6. Most of our education systems work at the **tertiary level** with some at the **secondary level** and a small amount at the **primary level**. Thank god for this.
7. In our lives we cannot take too much **primary level** learning as it can be too disturbing. This is despite any protestations to the contrary. Saying I want to learn at a deep level and really believing I want to learn at a deep level does not mean I am able or ready to actually learn at a deep level.
8. Framing an adult educative learning process as being able to change a person’s values, beliefs or worldview is often highly grandiose. Which is a nice way of saying it is a questionable promise or in Aus speak – it is bullshit.
9. If a person or group enters into a process of warming up and developing their spontaneity then **primary level** learning is very possible. Psychodrama and Morenian processes generally work at the primary level but also have significant implications at the other levels. That is: a protagonist, the auxiliaries and the audience members in the group often learn at all levels during the course of a drama and this is often reflected in the sharing.

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Learning and teaching processes most appropriate to each level.

The following table illustrates the rough positions of learning processes as they relate to levels of learning. These boxes should rather be overlapping circles but my graphic capacity is rather limited. For instance discussions can be secondary, as well, depending on your relationships with the person you are discussing an idea with.

| | | | | | | |
|------------------|---|---|--------------------------|--|--|--|
| Tertiary | Lectures | Discussions | Reading | Movies, videos, | General input processes | Single loop reflection |
| Secondary | Practice | Discussions with examination of values, demonstration and simulations | Trying out and role play | On the job learning and demonstration | Concretisation, dramatic methods, Role Training and Morenian methods | Double loop reflection, critical reflection on learning bias |
| Primary | Reflection both written and discussions | Dialogue, Intimate relationships where role reversal occurs | You teaching others | Examination of values, worldview, deep simulations | Psychodrama sociodrama, sociometry, role training | Triple loop reflection, critical reflection on assumptions |

This is a general model and as I wrote at the beginning of this paper – it is a useful rule of thumb. There are many other factors that allow a person to learn at a deeper level. There can be many times when a person reads a book which I have suggested is generally a **tertiary level** learning process yet they are profoundly affected at a **primary level**. For instance a well placed/timed quote, poem or piece of music can affect a person. Or a biography. As an attempt to make this model more inclusive of these types of moments I suggest that either:

1. Those learning processes that influence learning below their typical level do so by creating a reflective loop of some sort either externally, such as in the book, or internally, such as when listening to music. It is the critical reflective warm up that lead to the learning. Or
2. Timing is all and I recommend you read Berne Neville's book *Educating Psyche*. His model includes the steps of Preparation, Incubation, illumination and Verification model where illumination is a critical time factored learning moment.

This model also implies that it isn't resistant people that oppose change, learning and the like rather it is normal human reluctance to shift worldviews and deeply held values.