

Transformative Table Talk: Analysis of a Home Economics Education Symposium

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This paper shares an analysis of the table talk at a Canadian home economics education symposium focused on transformative practice. Participants commented that transformative practice takes time and entails reflection, self-awareness, and self-knowledge. Ensuring that curriculum development serves their needs and those of students requires consultation and collaboration, working within the system, research, and dealing with ideologies. The integrity of the profession can be maintained if individual practitioners have integrity and by dealing with the issue of unqualified teachers teaching home economics. Several key topics were judged to be absent or silent in the home economics curriculum, including teaching processes, attention to diversity and equity, and transformative learning experiences. Although in agreement that home economics education overlaps with other subjects, participants strongly urged the profession to take ownership of the subject area as they worked with other subjects in complementary relationships.

This paper reports an analysis of a Canadian home economics education initiative. Since 1991, home economics teachers, students, administrators, ministries, supervisors, professional associations, and researchers have gathered in Canada every other year for a symposium about home economics education (called the *Issues and Directions in Home economics/Family studies/Human ecology* symposium). Thirteen symposia have been held, mostly in Ontario and Western Canada. The Canadian initiative posts symposia proceedings and calls for papers at its own website (Canadian Symposium, 2016).

As a caveat, in Canada, home economics is called family studies at the public school level, and human ecology (and other labels) at the university level. The term home economics is usually used to refer to the profession in general. Although the profession is known by other names in various parts of the world (e.g., family and consumer sciences, consumer sciences, human sciences), the insights from this paper apply to anyone concerned with educating people from our profession's perspective. This paper employed the term *home economics* to report the study's results.

The intent of the symposium is for attendees to talk and listen to each other rather than to outside experts (Grover, 1997). Per the symposium format, each conference committee prepares guiding questions to shape table talk. In principle, table talk refers to informal (semi-organized) meaningful conversations about issues that really matter. People strive to talk, be understood and get to know each others' points of view. In a purposefully created safe space, people explore, articulate and engage in conversations about the big questions of life (The Ugly Duckling Company, 2016). In this case, the big question is home economics education.

2005 Symposium on Transformative Practice

This paper reports on the table talk at the 2005 symposium held in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The author attended the symposium. The big idea for this symposium was *transformative practice*. A longstanding component of home economics work (Peterat & Vaines, 1992), transformative practice was and remains an important professional issue in Canada, the United States and abroad (e.g., Helton Meador, 2008; McGregor, 2006; Smith, 2005; Smith, Peterat, & de Zwart, 2004). Indeed, as recently as 2014, the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) passed a resolution pursuant to celebrating the International Year of the Family (IYF). The resolution identified transformative practice as one of four family and consumer sciences (FCS) practice areas (Nelson, 2014). Specifically, FCS practice (the name now used for the profession in the US) is viewed as "a societal arena to influence and develop policy to advocate for individuals, families, and communities to achieve empowerment and well-being, *to use transformative practices* [emphasis added], and to facilitate sustainable futures" (Nelson, 2014, p. 53).

Despite that the data for this paper are from 2005, their import remains significant (i.e., worthy of consideration). Present-day home economics practitioners can benefit from this paper. Their contemporary, integrated practice can be informed and further transformed through an analysis and discussion of these still-relevant data. The need to be transformative never goes away because change is ever present in today's world. Practice that is transformative responds to the profound challenges of working in a radically changing and uncertain world. With keen insights into how individuals, families, communities, organizations, and the wider social environment are changing, home economics practitioners can transform their practice to critically and reflectively accommodate and facilitate these transformations.

Method and Findings

At the symposium, each of five questions was prefaced with a set of three or four topic-related papers, which participants were expected to read ahead of time (see program at de Zwart, 2005). Over the course of two days, people at seven tables each addressed all five questions, capturing the essence of their conversations on flip charts (summaries are at McGregor, 2005). The author attended the symposium. This paper offers a synopsis of and commentary on the ideas on the flip charts, anticipating that participants' insights still have meaning for contemporary home economics education. The analytical commentary that follows is organized using the five questions prepared for the 2005 symposium table talks. As a caveat, because the five questions were posed in second person (*us, we, our*), this analytical commentary employs both second and third person.

Question 1. What Does Transformative Practice Mean for Us?

The word *practice* means to work at something; in this case, to work at being a home economics educator. The word *transform* means to change markedly in appearance, nature or function, and is often used in connection with a butterfly, which changes from mundane to beautiful. During transformation, metamorphism is involved, referring to completely changing the nature or appearance of something or someone. Taken together, transformative practice involves working at changing oneself, students, the education system, and the profession to such a profound degree that a completely new entity emerges.

Couple this understanding of transformative practice with the meaning of transformative learning, and home economics education becomes very powerful. When learning is transformative, people's world view changes, and they see the world through a new paradigm (Mezirow, 1991). On another level, transformative leaders share power with people and help them reach their potential as they all work towards the same vision for a more moral and just world (McGregor, 2006). Most of the table talk for this question reflected this comprehensive notion of transformative practice. Participants gravitated toward the following transformative ideas:

- reflection, self-awareness and self-knowledge lead to personal, curricular, and professional change;
- change can be embraced and viewed as an opportunity;
- student-centered and experiential learning are transformative pedagogies;
- transformative practice takes time; and,
- it requires a critical approach (seeking hidden power agendas) married with values reasoning, open-mindedness, and caring connections with people.

Question 2. How Can We Ensure That Curriculum Development Serves Our Needs and the Needs of Our Students?

Nominal agreement exists in the education discipline about how to define curriculum, let alone how to define curriculum development (Glatthorn, Boschee, Whitehead, & Boschee, 2012). Generically, curriculum is a framework for the enhancement and organization of the varied and numerous experiences of students in the school setting and beyond the school. It is a written plan of what kind of learning events should be included and how they should be organized (Glatthorn et al., 2012). Architects of the American national standards for FCS developed a process-oriented curriculum focused on four process areas: thinking, communication, management, and leadership. Their goal was to help FCS educators "integrate process skills and process questioning into existing curriculum" (Ashby, Conkin, & O'Connor, 2000, p. 209). Process-oriented FCS curricula use process questions to guide learners to higher levels of thinking. A process classroom draws on practical problems, critical science, practical reasoning, value and moral reasoning, and dialogue (Fox & Laster, 2000).

Curriculum development is a very detailed and time-consuming process. Fundamentally, people use either a top-down, implementation approach (the most common) or a bottom-up, enactment approach (least common). The implementation approach is not transformative in nature because it is so controlled by authority figures (Sowell, 2000). Because teachers are often asked to pilot pre-developed curricula and courses, this analytical commentary assumed that the home economics participants had experience with the top-down approach, and used it as their reference point when addressing this question.

The question asked about the *needs* of home economics teachers and students. A need is something that is missing, and must be provided. An alternate approach to home economics curricula is to look at what is working, the strengths (assets) that people possess already (or have the potential to develop), and balance that with what is missing (Piscopo & Muglietti, 2012). The strengths approach assumes it is more useful and helpful to draw on assets than to focus on weakness, deficiency, and dysfunction (Darybshire & Jackson, 2005). Also, the world tends to focus on what is missing rather than what is working (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Consequently, participants at the symposium likely focused on how the curriculum development process can meet what is missing, essential or required rather than what strengths and assets

teachers and students have to offer. Indeed, participants at only one table explicitly said that teachers need to be aware of needs and strengths (assets) of stakeholders.

The second portion of the question asked how the curriculum development process *serves* the needs of the profession and of students. To *serve* means to be useful, beneficial, or suitable for a purpose. But to play devil's advocate, service stems from the Latin *servitium*, which also means slave (Harper, 2016). Were participants being asked to assume they are slaves to the curriculum development process or that the development of curriculum is their slave to command and control? Given the way the question is worded (how can we ensure curriculum serves our needs), the latter seems most likely. No particular needs that required fulfilment were evident on the table talk flip charts. Nonetheless, participants did articulate ideas for how curriculum development can meet the needs of home economics educators and students. They indicated that a transformative process needs to respect and include:

- inclusiveness;
- consultation and collaboration using open communication while remaining open-minded (willing to change perspectives if information justifies it);
- working “the system,” especially via the formation of networks and professional learning communities;
- research (especially students’ opinions and their experiences with the curriculum);
- regular curriculum reviews and revisions that involve many stakeholders, striving to stay current with the changing world; and,
- dealing with tensions caused by ideologies shaping government administration versus home economics teachers’ perceptions, and between students’ and teachers’ perceptions of curriculum.

Several other ideas merit further discussion. One suggestion was to “adapt the curriculum to the clientele.” Referring to students as *clients* implies an exchange relationship wherein the client is dependent on the expert. If clients do not succeed, they can, in turn, blame the expert for bad advice, and the expert can blame them for not following directions. A more transformative approach is to view the students as learning partners (McGregor, Pendergast, Seniuk, Eghan, & Engberg, 2008). Also, participants at one table suggested that “teachers have a *solid relationship* with the curriculum.” This framing is transformative. Being in relationship with something implies obligations to nurture the link, keep it strong and healthy, and ensure reciprocal engagement. From this perspective, home economics teachers would be actively engaged with curriculum development rather than acquiescing to the top-down approach.

Participants at another table referred to *entitlements*, saying teachers need to be assertive and go after the money that is “out there,” meaning we have to claim *our* resources. A sense of entitlement is a claim to a right, especially a perceived right. If people are entitled, they feel they can demand or expect something (Waite, 2012). This comment was encouraging because, for too long, home economics teachers have not been assertive enough (Pendergast, 2001). Assertiveness means standing up for oneself while not stepping on the rights of others. It entails positively stating one’s position on an issue, with conviction. It means being willing to defend oneself when people step into one’s boundaries so one can mitigate the chances of being unduly influenced or have one’s position sidetracked in some way. Assertiveness is a powerful tool for transformative home economics educators (McGregor, 2006).

Question 3. How Can We Maintain the Integrity of the Profession?

Assuming transformative practice has implications for the integrity of the profession, the participants were asked to converse about how to *maintain* the profession's integrity. Three aspects of this question warrant examination. First, the question asked people to think about how to maintain the integrity *of* the profession rather than how to maintain integrity *within* the profession. The latter (within) is necessary for the former (Rehm & Jackman, 1995), but no one questioned this framing of the issue (no evidence of this on the flip charts). Rehm and Jackman (1995) said that home economics teachers "must ask: What can be done to solve internal problems . . . in a philosophically sound manner?" (p. 10).

Second, the word *maintain* has several definitions, but it was not defined for or by people at the tables. It can mean to preserve the status quo (cause something to continue); to keep in good condition or belief; to supply with the necessities of life; to support against a criticism; to hold up the weight of something; to state to be true; and, to put into words, positively and with conviction (Waite, 2012).

Third, integrity was not defined either. Before an analysis of the comments for this question is shared, a definition of integrity is offered. The Latin root *integritatem* means wholeness, completeness, and soundness (Harper, 2016). Integrity refers to the actions of those persons who *consistently* act from a firmly established character pattern of doing the right thing according to their principles. Integrity also means being scrupulous, honest, truthful, open, fair, and faithful. Practicing with integrity means being bound by, and following, moral and ethical standards even when, *especially when*, making life's hard choices. If people act without integrity, others may become mistrustful of them because their actions are not predictable or consistent (McGregor & Gentzler, 2009). Rehm and Jackman (1995) said "the 'cornerstone' of transformation within home economics education must begin with personal transformation" (p. 13), intimating professional integrity.

As an observation, asking participants about how they can *maintain* integrity could imply that the profession is losing integrity (i.e., it needs help to continue to exist). None of the table talk challenged why the conference planners framed a question intimating there was an issue with the profession's integrity. An analysis of the table talk revealed that participants understood *maintain* to mean a combination of (a) support against criticism, (b) keep in good condition, and (c) state something with conviction. This finding implies that the participants were grappling with criticisms of the profession, struggling to make sure it remains sustainable, and figuring out how to speak up for the profession with conviction. The following ideas emerged from the table talk about how to 'maintain the integrity of the profession':

- deal with the issue of unqualified teachers teaching home economics (some said don't let this happen and others said support people in this role so integrity is enhanced);
- ensure positive public relations, promotion of the profession, and that we have strong advocates;
- network far and wide with a diversity of actors outside the profession and classroom;
- foster professional memberships and nurture their involvement;
- be innovative in the classroom;
- make sure each home economist has personal integrity (we are ambassadors of the profession);
- understand and promote families, the core of our belief system (know what we are

- talking about and speak with conviction); and,
- develop a pan-Canadian home economics education curriculum (implying that consistency yields integrity).

Most of the table talk related to the integrity ‘of the profession’ rather than integrity ‘within the profession.’ Without the latter, the profession cannot be transformative, progressive, or sustainable. Most of the table talk dealt with the issue of unqualified educators practicing in the field. This trend was viewed as an issue of integrity *within* the profession, which manifests as outward perceptions of integrity *of* the profession. The participants felt that schools are using unqualified teachers because of limited perceptions about the field: anyone can cook, sew, raise a child, and spend money. Actually, this perception may be less an issue of integrity than an issue of ideology and paradigms about the value of families as an institution. If families are not valued (except for their contributions as laborers and consumers), then it makes sense that the profession is not valued either, making it imperative that we understand the role that ideologies play in home economics education (McGregor et al., 2008; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). Actually, participants raised the issue of ideologies and home economics education while addressing Question 2.

Question 4a. What are the Absences or Silences in the Home Economics/Family Studies Curriculum?

In this question, participants were asked to comment on what is absent *or* silent in the curriculum. The word *or* is a conjunction used in grammar to connect two alternate ideas. Absent means missing (not present), and silent means present but not expressed, whether because of not being able to *or* being able but choosing not to (Waite, 2012). In effect, participants were asked to identify elements that are (a) missing from the curriculum or (b) there, but not being taught (i.e., silent). Table 1 summarizes the comments made at the seven tables for this question.

Table 1

Absences or Silences in the Home Economics Curriculum

Absent	Silent	Noted (not clear if participants meant absent or silent)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attention to citizenship • critical perspective on consumerism • First Nation’s perspective • multiculturalism • diversity and equity • no voices other than middle class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • claim to parenting education • teaching of processes • attention to the broader community • inclusiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • real life connections (transformative learning experiences) • topics such as genetics, nutrition, health, citizenship, and social justice

It is not known if participants discerned the grammatical nuances of the words absent and silent, and the intent conveyed with the conjunction *or*. The flip charts reveal no evidence of this distinction. However, indicating that concepts are absent or silent implies validation that they *should* be taught in home economics. Especially revealing is that the items noted as silent (see Table 1) are understood to be in the curriculum, just not taught. This was a very transformative moment for those attending the symposium. Realizing that parenting, teaching processes, relating to the broader community, and being inclusive are supposed to be taught but are not was a telling moment. New questions then arose, including “Why are we silent on these issues?” and “Why are we not dealing with issues of citizenship, social justice, diversity, and the lived experiences of students?” The topics identified as absent in home economics curriculum are often taught in social studies. Identifying them as relevant for home economics is evidence of the integrative, interdisciplinary nature of the profession. Perhaps participants sensed this during the table talks (to be discussed shortly).

Some of the table talk pertained to things *missing for the teachers* rather than missing from the curriculum, including (a) the lack of time for reflection about rationale for practice, (b) the need for sensitivity training for teachers, and (c) the lack of interdisciplinary communications. Most telling was the observation that *we* are silent; thus, we lose our subjects to other disciplines. These comments provided an opportunity for transformation. The profession’s philosophical underpinnings include reflective practice, interdisciplinarity, and advocacy for the profession and its subject areas. The fact that these were deemed *missing* implied that participants appreciated the *need* for these philosophical underpinnings. These comments were also a bit disconcerting because visionaries in the field have been advocating for these philosophical aspects of practice for decades (see McGregor, 2012); yet, people *still* perceived them as being absent in their practice.

Question 4b. In What Ways Should We Transform Curriculum Content?

Participants at only two of the seven tables addressed the question of what *should* be done to transform home economics curriculum content (Tables 5 and 6). Participants at Table 5 addressed both of Questions 4a and 4b. Mirroring what it said for the former, participants at this table felt that home economics educators need to be more inclusive, communicate more with other subject areas, adopt a more holistic approach, and allow for student input in the curriculum development process. Participants at Table 6 did not address what is absent or silent (Question 4a), but they did suggest that in order to transform the content of home economics curriculum, educators need to (a) be inclusive and dialogue with students as well as (b) include more communicative/interpretive modes of action as teaching strategies. And, (c) when we *do* use technical approaches, we need to recognize that we have alternatives (i.e., interpretive and critical) (see Brown, 1993; Fox & Laster, 2000; Fox, Stewart, & Erickson, 2008; Rehm & Jackman, 1995).

Participants at the remaining five tables did not engage with the idea of curricular transformation, perhaps due to time constraints. Or, maybe they got caught up in the ‘what is wrong or missing mode’ from Question 4a, with no hope for how to effect change and make things better (4b)? Consider as well that Question 4b was normative, asking them what they *should* (ought to) do to transform the curriculum. Would answers have been more forthcoming if they had been asked to suggest what *can* be done (the technical mode)?

Furthermore, the modal verb *should* connotes a heavier burden, laden with ethical and moral overtones, while the modal verb *can* means capability and possibility. Brown (1978, 1993)

observed that members of the profession have shied away from the normative (*ought to*), critical realm. She frankly asserted that if people do not have a sense of moral authority or ideas about their moral purpose (i.e., what *should* be done), they should not be educators. In effect, she harshly suggested that the profession has to move beyond the technical mode, and embrace a normatively responsible, transformative mode of practice.

Question 5a. How Does Home Economics Overlap with Other Areas?

The big question for this symposium was transformative practice. This approach to practice is often viewed as an interdisciplinary approach to working with change by integrating practical skills and processes with deep self-reflection, and by emphasizing critical, creative action in the world (McGregor, 2006). Regarding interdisciplinarity and transformative practice, Question 5a queried how *does* home economics overlap with other areas, with the follow up question, What are the implications of these answers? Question 5a used the main verb *does* (to accomplish or carry out) rather than the modal verbs *can* (possibilities) or *should* (moral overtones). The choice of verb likely affected the participants' answers.

To *overlap* can mean two things, (a) having something in common or (b) partly covering over something (Waite, 2012). Again, this term was not clarified for the participants. Respectively, commonality implies sharing an attribute(s) while covering something implies enveloping, protecting, or concealing it. Conventionally, home economics is understood to share common attributes with other areas (disciplines), but it does things differently than the other areas. Conceiving overlap to mean concealing or enveloping other subject areas is foreign to home economics because we are interdisciplinary and integrative. We count on using other disciplines' knowledge so we can weave it together in new ways 'to help families help themselves' (Collins, 1994; Peterat, 1989; Roubanis, 2014).

As evidenced by the table talk comments, participants understood overlap as sharing common attributes. They recommended (a) using a Venn diagram with home economics in the core where all three circles overlap, and they said that (b) because it is multidisciplinary, home economics is *supposed* to overlap everywhere. (c) One group drew a web with home economics in the center, overlapping with a collection of school subject areas and learning processes.

Participants at another table said, "Our content is in a lot of subject areas." This point of view is different from the previous three comments, which assumed that other content is *in* home economics. If our content is in other subjects, does that mean it is being concealed and enveloped by other subjects, rather than sharing commonalities? Those making this comment might have been experiencing the acute loss of home economics in their schools. They might have seen home economics as hidden and obscured from view (i.e., losing visibility). It is doubtful they saw it as being protected (another meaning of overlap), although some provincial and state education administrators take this view when they place home economics content in other subjects, reasoning that this curriculum strategy will protect home economics.

Participants at another table queried, "Is it an overlap or a complementary relationship?" This is an intriguing and forward thinking question. *Complementary* means completing something, making it whole. *Relationship* means being associated with each other or in connection with something (Waite, 2012); hence, a complementary relationship implies that home economics and other subject areas *need each other* to complete each other, and make them whole, another transformative insight.

Question 5b. What are the Implications of the Answer to Question 5a?

The participants' answer to this question seemed to be, "It all depends." They said that curricular overlap has the potential to either (a) create synergy and strengthen the profession or (b) push us to the margins (where home economics can be co-opted, thereby weakening the profession). Also, participants noted that cross-curricular linkages set a context for student learnings whereby they learn to make connections to everyday life. They felt that home economics lives this philosophy in that it 'teaches everyday life.' To affect these curricular connections, home economists need to take ownership of, and responsibility for sharing, their expertise, using interdisciplinary units. The participants called this *reverse integration*, recognizing that we usually draw on other disciplines (see Roubanis, 2014).

Interestingly, Peterat (1989) challenged the profession to do more than serve other disciplines, saying we should proactively create transformative knowledge that changes society for the better. That being said, participants' combining the idea of taking ownership and responsibility was transformative. *Ownership* means possessing something with the right to transfer it to others. *Responsibility* is a social force that binds people to their obligations, and to any courses of action demanded by that force (i.e., answerable to others). As they practice from a position where they are bound by the forces of society, home economics educators need to take ownership of the profession by taking action, and being answerable to others when transferring their expertise, ideas, and wisdom. Such an approach is a transformative and liberating idea.

Discussion and Conclusion

This analysis of a 2005 Canadian home economics education symposium, which focused on transformative practice, revealed several compelling insights for contemporary home economics education. If we embrace change and see it as an opportunity, we can engage in transformative practice. It will be hard work, take time, and necessitate self-knowledge as well as deep knowledge about families. Practitioners will have to wrestle with the power of ideologies, which entails embracing a critical approach (i.e., seeking hidden agendas). The conference planners linked transformative practice with professional integrity, and participants did not question this framing. They said that if each practitioner has integrity, so will the profession. Transformative home economics educators would network far and wide as they promote the profession. Being strong advocates and ambassadors for the profession would be transformative, contributing to integrity (see McGregor, 2008).

The notion of transformative practice raised concerns about the assertiveness of home economics educators in protecting and promoting the profession. Participants expressed a sense of entitlement. They said that home economics teachers need to speak out and stand up for the subject area in the public school system. If home economics becomes marginalized, it will struggle to be transformative. Conversely, intentionally overlapping with other subject areas should be couched in taking ownership of the profession while being answerable to others and to social forces.

Regarding questions pertaining to curriculum, some participants said home economics teachers have a solid relationship with the curriculum, intimating they have an obligation to actively engage with curricular changes in a transformative manner. Several topics were judged to be absent or silent in the Canadian home economics curriculum, suggesting transformative learning is less likely to happen (e.g., real life connections, critical perspectives, and social justice). Transformative home economics educators would transform the curriculum by being more inclusive, interdisciplinary, and student-centered. They would also teach from a three

systems of action perspective (i.e., best balance of technical, interpretive and critical), and from a process-oriented approach (see Table 1).

Table talk comments intimated a strong perceived link between transformative practice and the integrated, interdisciplinary approach. Participants also felt that, in order to be transformative, the integrity of the profession has to be maintained. This would be achieved by dealing with criticisms of the profession, making sure we remain sustainable, and speaking up for the profession with conviction. In a roundabout way, participants also suggested that transformative practice would require philosophical work.

In conclusion, direct and implicit insights from these earlier Canadian table talks reinforce the potential of transformative practice for contemporary home economics educators. The symposium approach could serve as a model for local, district, provincial, state, and national home economics teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and professional association leaders. Facilitated conversations and discourse about home economics education is a timeless imperative because change is relentless. The profession must continue to transform if we intend to empower individuals and families to do the same. This *is* possible because we are all working “within the context of the transformational potential of Home Economics” (Hodelin, 2012, p. ix). Ideas from the Canadian symposium can “inspire others and help inform the future [of the profession]” (Nickols & Kay, 2015, p. 1).

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Citation

McGregor, S. L. T. (2016, Fall/Winter). Transformative table talk: Analysis of a home economics education symposium. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences Education*, 33(2), 25-36. Available at <http://www.natefacs.org/Pages/v33no2McGregor.pdf>.