

**Bridging binaries: dialogue as a way to transformative learning; paper to the  
International Transformative Learning Conference, New York, November, 2018**

*Laura Formenti*

*Milano Bicocca University, Italy*

*Linden West*

*Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom*

**Abstract:**

The dominant epistemology of Western thought is binary, like logic or the language of computer science. I/Other, We/They are binaries. Building a transformative community must overcome binary thinking and avoid self-idealisation and denigration of the other. It must create inclusive, dialogical ways to transcend polarities.

We draw on experiences of writing a new book on *Transforming perspectives* (Formenti & West, 2018). It is a meta-disciplinary contribution to illuminating struggles to transform. It has been a pilgrimage, no less, graced by dialogue with diverse others: including Zygmunt Bauman, Gregory Bateson, Freud, Jung, Anna Lorenzetto, Sofia Corradi and many students from our research.

We have used a dialogic, auto/biographical, critical method of inquiry to conclude that transformative learning should itself become an object of embodied, dialogical, heartfelt investigation, rooted in auto/biographical experience, so as to avoid reification and binary fissures. We conclude that transformation is a hard, lifewide struggle requiring the company of diverse, good enough relationships. It is far more than a marketing slogan, quick-fix therapy, or educational consumerism. It asks no less than everything.

**Key Words:** transformation, dialogue, binaries, pilgrimage, otherness

The dominant epistemology of Western thought is binary. Logic is binary. The language of computer science is binary. I/Other, We/They are binaries. To build a transformative community that avoids self-idealisation, ideologically driven by 'immune defence' against otherness, we must overcome binary thinking and find creative, inclusive, dialogical ways to bridge and transcend polarities. This can be a road to deep epistemological transformation, with many relational, emotional, epistemological and ethical implications. Our contribution is theoretical, methodological and experiential.

Overcoming binaries is difficult: not only our frameworks of meaning must be transformed, but our way of creating meaning is challenged. This brings us toward the terrain of tertiary learning (Bateson, 1982), or deep transformation, conversion and transcendence. It asks us to abandon the idea of an Ego separated from its context and embrace a more holistic worldview. Learning ceases being simply an individual effort, and becomes collective and co-evolutionary, a process that happens in-between individuals, and goes beyond living humans, to involve the whole environment and history, animals, vegetables, and previous generations. The systemic view, here represented by Laura, and the psychoanalytic/psychosocial view of Linden, can combine to offer insights in this direction.

Creating a transformative community is a real challenge as well as possibility, and we draw on our experiences of doing this in a new book on *Transforming perspectives* (Formenti & West, 2018). It is a meta-disciplinary contribution to the struggle to transform, or what we have called, in the book, a pilgrimage, graced by dialogue with diverse others: sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman, depth psychologists such as Freud and Jung, adult educators like John Dirkx and Libby Tisdell, diverse feminists as well as the many students we have engaged with in our research (Formenti and West, 2018)

We began by interrogating the binaries shaping our own lives. A dialogic, auto/biographical, critical method of inquiry into our theories and practices has been essential. The notion of transformative learning itself must become more of an object of embodied, dialogical, heartfelt investigation, rooted in auto/biographical experience, to avoid reification and binary fissures; and grounded in a quest for beauty and truth, however problematic these concepts can be

We are a man and a woman, researchers of difference (Norris, Sawyer and Lund, 2012) from Italy and England, and different in many other regards: age, family, language, culture, and even as psychotherapists (Laura has been a family systemic therapist, a product of the Milan School; Linden is a psychoanalytic object relations therapist, with a different way of framing the nature and quality of our interactions with others and otherness). And yet, as academics, we share the original ideal of the university (*ex pluribus, unum*), as a global community of scholars, and, as such, a location for a millennial, transformative, dialogical experiment, across local, historical, and epistemological boundaries. The university was founded by students who wanted to learn and paid masters to teach them. They had a common language (Latin), and a shared quest for truth. Discussion was strong: philosophical dispute was a tool to build shared ideas, by contrasting different theses. There were many limits in the old system, not least the use of religion to mortify creativity and enforce power,

the exclusion of women, the poor, and other categories of people from the discussion. There was a monolithic, maybe masculinist idea of truth.

But in present times, notwithstanding mass access, the academy is far from open and integrated, ruled as it is by neoliberal ideas, where students are silenced on too many occasions, and competition prevails against dialogue and discussion. What kind of community – or communities - is the academy? What kind of relationship does it propose to other communities, e.g. in education, civil society or politics?

We have experienced situations, in the academic community, where dialogue is enhanced by a facilitating, eclectic, loving yet challenging spirit. We have ourselves enacted a deepening dialogue in the conferences of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA). Our reflections in this paper include the metaphor of critical friends, gathering to discuss, share and reciprocally question each other, in generous ways. This is our ideal. But we have experienced many struggles around this, and processes of idealization or spitting into good and bad, perfection and imperfection, the good us and the unsatisfactory other. We have also witnessed, on many occasions in our institutions, isolation, marginalization, competition and feelings of being ‘fish out of water’, mirroring what often happens to adult learners entering an educational habitus. Our dialogue was very helpful in creating reflexivity about the processes we sought to create. We experience the world that we ourselves enact. Coherence between our theory of learning and our action becomes a tenet of our method.

Our story is, as stated, one of pilgrimage, to illuminate and transcend diverse binary perspectives on transformative learning, starting from our own. In the pilgrimage (a metaphor inspired by Libby Tisdell’s work, (Tisdell, 2017)), we met many theoretical and poetical friends, like Jack Mezirow, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Sabine Spielrein, Patricia Cranton, Dante Alighieri, William Blake, Donald Winnicott, Zygmunt Bauman, Paulo Freire, R.H. Tawney, Gregory Bateson, John Dirkx, Axel Honneth, Anna Lorenzetto and Sofia Corradi. The conversations with Bauman and Freud led us into pessimism about our human capacity for transformation. Bauman questions the relevance and even danger of emphasising transformation in a liquid world of economic, relational and familial instability, where formation itself is rendered problematic and where there can be a fracture from the inherited wisdoms of the past. Education is too often reduced to instrumentalist preparation for labour markets and the perpetual marketing of self. Freud challenged our capacity for illusion, and

the limitations of reason against the largely unconscious power of sexual and tribal competition; think Donald Trump, maybe, in this context (Formenti and West, 2018).

We argue however that deeper understandings of transformative learning, and its role in community building, are enriched when we learn to dialogue, in a good enough, diverse, reflexive yet also challenging community. But what is dialogue? It is not empathy, or “being good”, or thinking in the same way: it is about the recognition of difference, a sincere effort to understand the world of the other, and the emotional/cognitive resonances it provokes in us. Otherness compels us, awakening what Jung calls the Shadow. Real dialogue starts with the disorientating experience of embarrassment, anger, fear, and the risk of conflict, when a polarity emerges, and we make a real effort to understand the position that is not ours. In the philosophical disputation, the one who has a position is asked to take the position of her adversary, and to bring arguments in favour of the other’s thesis. Writing too is a form of quest, inquiry and challenge (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005): we used autoethnographic and autobiographic writing, and metalogues, to bring forth our awareness of our (and our culture’s) unavoidable limits, shadows, and prejudices. Academic writing can be so dry and abstract and often hinders not only dialogue, but the true expression of our humanity. We may enact new possibility and another world by engaging with more poetic, narrative, embodied as well as critical forms of writing. This may be a way to re-enchant the academy (Voss & Wilson, 2017).

We have enriched our dialogue by thinking in stories, as Gregory Bateson (1979) suggested, and using ‘double description’ to achieve depth and foster an ecology of difference. We have sought to transcend competitive thinking, or the need for a unique truth. We juxtapose our ideas and writing (Norris, Sawyer and Lund, 2012), in a critical way, to engage with specific, troubling and sometimes pervasive binaries: of mind and body, spirit and politics, conscious and unconscious process, as well as the masculine and feminine propensities within us all.

Our first bridge is between mind and body, cognition and emotion. We suggest that a fulsome understanding of objects, in art or an idea, involves an emotional, embodied response: they can speak to us viscerally, touching our heart, filling us full of anticipation (and sometimes dread). And yet, we need the other to discover that we have a perspective. *What do you see?* At the start of our pilgrimage, we use a metalogue on Michelangelo’s *Pietà* to compose an understanding that combines glimpses of the divine with a feminist challenge to particular representations of women in art.

The dominant cognitive reading of a dilemma is something within someone’s head that can be named and analysed rationally, then to be solved by some conscious decision. But this

does not reveal the whole person and relational complexity surrounding it. It can be dangerously reductive.

*Linden – [...] What do you see?*

*Laura – [...] I see an amazing piece of art, La Pietà by Michelangelo. [...]*

*Linden - I see something that speaks to me. It's transcendental. Sometimes you get the same feeling in a landscape. Something beyond representation: you are overwhelmed by it. [...] It was years ago. I cried when I saw it [...] half-hidden in a corner of St Peter's in Rome [...] Well, I was wandering around this huge basilica, and five to ten minutes later I saw the sculpture and seeing it triggered the strong reaction. Overwhelming. I did not know immediately that it was by Michelangelo. Only afterwards, walking away from Piazza San Pietro, I saw it in the souvenir stands: dozens, hundreds of postcard reproductions of La Pietà. Then I knew.*

*Laura – My first meeting with it was at sixteen, visiting Rome with my class. It surprised me, it was already my favourite piece, but I had imagined it bigger. I also felt strangely moved by it, for the contrast of beauty and sorrow that it communicates. At that time, the piece was not protected, as it is now, under a glass box. You could almost touch it. Sculptures are so material that I always think about touching them.*

*Linden – Touching is a different way of knowing from seeing.*

*Laura – Yes, wasn't this conversation meant to illuminate the process of seeing? Learning by seeing seems crucial for the human species.*

The typical academic way of thinking is competitive; the search for truth and the power of knowledge, degenerates into the domination of one idea over another, one form of knowing as superior to another. This needs to be challenged by a more encompassing approach to knowing and knowers. Harmony is the composition of opposites, which are not “out there”, but created by us. This is done amazingly in art.

*Linden – Perception is more than seeing. It is a meeting between inside and outside. Body, heart and soul are entailed.*

*Laura - What do we know about perception? Visual perception is so dominant for us but touching or hearing work differently. Do you know John Berger's Ways of Seeing, the book from the BBC show in the Seventies? He claimed that 'seeing comes before words' and we approach art in ways that are not neutral since we are guided by assumptions, and our frames may be problematic indeed, shaped by power, by our previous learning contexts, and prejudice. How can we become aware of the relationship between what we see and what we know? And how did we come to see things in such a way, affected by what we know or believe?*

*Linden – I know the book. 'Every image embodies a way of seeing' (Berger, 1972, p. 10). I liked it, but somehow, I was not fully satisfied; it is too materialistic in its suspicion of the idea of mystery and the religious.*

In the clash of perspectives, transformative learning lurks. We suggest a need both to be in love and dialogue with an object, on the one hand, to be able to fully know and appreciate it: like the Saints in the New Testament, or women in their relationship to feminism. But also, on the other hand, to remain open to otherness, to different responses, and the disorientations this brings.

*Laura – [...] we are too much interested in 'what' we see, and we forget everything about the 'how'.*

*Linden – What we see is relevant, though.*

*Laura – Yes, of course, but when we look at something we are enacting a world through the relationship we weave with that something, in that context. The context and the process are relevant. [...] relationships are going on here and now, between us, with this place where we are, with Michelangelo through this image of his piece of art, and even with my father... all of them enter in the process of vision, in my thoughts and your thoughts, and in our talking. [...].*

*Linden – Complex and potentially conflictual. Different ways of seeing entail different ideas, values, beliefs. People get anxious when they realise there are other visions, different from their own, especially when something is precious to them.*

*Laura – This is why we need dialogue. [...] We need to know the other's perspective, since somehow, we know it is different from our own.*

*Linden – I will tell you why I showed this image (of La Pietà) to you. There was a recent episode, you were also there, remember? In my university, during a conference a couple of years ago: Re-enchanting the academy. In a workshop, we were asked to describe something enchanting, which touched our souls. I thought the Pietà and told the story that I have told you. [...] but another participant, a woman said 'When I look at that picture, I do not see anything sublime at all. I see a man's idealization of women, I see a religion that I do not like, and I see patriarchy stamped all over!'*

*Laura – Yes, I see this perspective too.*

*Linden - An Islamist would maybe think the statue is idolatry, to be destroyed. There were periods of iconoclasm in Christianity too, of course. This statue might have been destroyed. To re-enchant our lives, we need to engage with different perspectives without destruction and breakdown. We can walk in St. Peter's – or anywhere else - and let go of the negativity, and the forces that destroy possibilities for dialogue. The transcendental does not belong to one culture. I am also thinking of an observation by the classicist Mary Beard, in a BBC television series called Civilisations. She visited Ely Cathedral, in East Anglia, where statues of Saints were desecrated in a burst of iconoclasm in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England. Heads and hands were chopped off, stained glass windows destroyed and replaced by plain glass. And yet in one chapel where much damage was done, a different quality of beauty was created through the increased light and space. This is complex, but we might even transcend destruction, to see the world, beauty and ourselves in new ways.*

We have experienced varying degrees of love and challenge in our relationship with each other and writers like Gregory Bateson and Donald Winnicott, who enable us to bridge particulars and the general, psychic health with the state of whole worlds. When Lake Erie is polluted, our psyches are too.

Our second bridge is between the spiritual and the political in struggles for social justice. We can get lost in overly materialist and intellectualised readings of profounder social transformations. Here again, our journey illuminates how particular communities develop

spiritual, or even religious sensibilities, in relation to the political. Adult education groups, and social movements, may be energised by glimpses of beauty (in the spirit of pragmatism), and of transcendence in immanence, to enhance collective and individual flourishing. But they can also struggle with difference too. We illuminate how the transcendent is found in reconciliation, in conviviality, storytelling, music, art as well as pilgrimage (Tisdell, 2017).

We move to bridge a third binary between conscious and unconscious processes. Mezirow was aware of the unconscious but gave it little attention, although John Dirkx (Cranton, Dirkx and Mezirow, 2006) has contributed to understanding such dynamics, drawing on Jungian theory. We illustrate the interplay of psychoanalysis and systemic theories by reference to our auto/biographical research into adult student experience. Good learning objects may initially be resisted, only later to be embraced in processes of mutual recognition. Conscious and unconscious processes are, in such terms, individual, relational and collective, as well as biological and ecological. And the unconscious is more than the repressed, representing what is difficult to know or control: the language of play, humour, dream, metaphor, symbol is required to cross this bridge, in the spirit of Bateson, Jung, Winnicott, Freud and Honneth.

The story of Brenda, an adult student in Linden's research, (West, 1996) illustrates the role of play and unconscious processes in learning and the struggle to transform. Brenda, at first, was a middle aged, nervous, diffident student struggling with the profound disorientating dilemmas of a husband's betrayal and children leaving home. She had been a being for others, and now felt abandoned, alone and deeply vulnerable. Brenda's transformation involved a kind of always incomplete transformation of self in the public spaces of a university. She struggled there and felt dismissed by particular tutors who could, she felt, look right through her. But she loved literature, and in a novel by Maupassant – *Boule de Suif (Suet Pudding)* – she found a character, a prostitute, with whom she could identify. She, the prostitute, was abused by two Prussian Army officers in the back of a coach. Someone, in short, who had been abused like her, Brenda, but nonetheless remained resilient and determined to keep on keeping on. Brenda, in what psychoanalysts call projective identification, internalised the prostitute as a good object, while she found legitimacy and recognition in the attentiveness and empathic attunement of a particular tutor. She felt seen and understood. This is the psychosocial territory of changing object relations and self/other recognition; as well as of play, self composition and new imaginative possibility.

Finally, we bridge binaries of gender, based on lived experiences of the masculine, feminine and otherness in our lives and communities. We problematize dominant discourses



of masculinity, violently reemerging nowadays in hyper-masculine, competitive, acquisitive, and aggressive dominance. Transformative learning lies, we argue, in men and women experiencing caring and nurturing roles, and the capacity for cooperation, reciprocal and dialogical learning, as well as for generating challenging, transgressive thoughts. Gender identities are fluid, her-story needs to merge with his, to allow deeper insight into the art of transformative possibility. Our paper both embodies and illuminates the process.

## **Conclusion**

Perspective defines a space and time, our position and action in the world. It depends on, and reveals, who we are. It is subjective, active and self-confirming. We do not see ‘something out there’, but the relationship we have with it and the context. Seeing is a subjective/objective dynamic and contextual: it is a process of multiple interactions. It is complex. So, we need to ask ‘how do you see?’ and start a dialogue, since the other will answer in ways that challenge our view. Her sight is always different.

Ways of seeing are also deeply political, which was what our colleague in the Canterbury conference was suggesting. Some ways are deemed more important than others. We must be able to continue a dialogue, even across such profound difference: but it is hard. Is this a fundamental purpose for adult education?

*Linden – Yes, I asked you ‘what do you see?’, as you asked me to do the same. And you answered. Then I also gave my answer. That brought us to where we are now.*

*Laura – Yes, but I had in mind many other questions, like a reciprocal interview. For example: Why art? But maybe this could be asked in another moment.*

*Linden – Yes, I think so, dialogue takes time.*

We end these thoughts on the varying dimensions and possibilities for transformation in learning and educational contexts. But it is a hard, and maybe a lifelong, lifewide struggle requiring the company of diverse others. Transformation or transformative learning are far more than the marketing slogans of educational institutions, quick-fix therapists, or a rampant consumerism. They ask no less than everything.

## **References**

- Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Dirkx, J., Cranton, P., and Mezirow, J. (2006) Musings and reflections on the meaning and context, and processes of transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Learning*, 4, 123-139.
- Formenti, L., and West, L. (2018) *Transforming perspectives in adult education and lifelong learning. A dialogue*. Palgrave MacMillan, London.
- Norris J., Sawyer R., Lund D. (eds.) (2012). *Duoethnography. Dialogic methods for social, health, and educational research*. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek.
- Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2005). Writing: A Method of Inquiry. In Denzin & Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 959-978). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Tisdell, L. (2017). Transformative Pilgrimage Learning and Spirituality on the Camino de Santiago: Making the Way by Walking. In A.Laros, T.Fuhr and E.W.Taylor (Eds), *Transformative learning meets bildung. An International Exchange*. Rotterdam: Sense, 341-352
- Voss, A. & Wilson, S. (2017) (eds.). *Re-enchanting the Academy*. Auckland: Rubedo Press.
- West, L. (1996). *Beyond Fragments, adults, motivation and higher education, a biographical analysis*. London: Taylor and Francis