

**Challenging de-contextualised understanding of TL: a dialogue on psychosocial and ecological perspectives**

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Transformative learning has been defined by Jack Mezirow as the specific adult capacity to challenge and change one's own meaning perspectives or mind sets. This notion has provoked debate in Europe about its potential limitations, not least the risk of trivialization, reification, and narrowing of adult learning to an individual and cognitive event, lacking a biographical and contextual sensitivity (West, 2014). In Europe, as well as North America, there are different traditions that imagine learning and educational processes as ways to build critical perspectives and favour social justice (as in Paulo Freire's 'conscientisation' principle) , in creating a democratic citizenry, giving emphasis to the social rather than individual transformation (Brookfield and Holt, 2012).

To be fair, Mezirow can be read or developed in this direction too. Besides, as a learner himself, he was always open to dialogue and to build a comprehensive and integrated theory. However, he could not escape, as all of us, his own cultural backcloth. This is a main point for our research, and this paper: it is not possible to avoid referring to presuppositions and perspectives of meaning, we need methods and contexts where a truly dialogic, open, and developing theory is collaboratively built. Dialogue is not meant to achieve a master story, to convince each other, blurring our differences, but is a relational endeavour that celebrates difference, challenge each of us and keeps the conversation open, eventually involving the readers in the process too.

We want to bring into our analysis the recognition of unconscious, relational, deeply embodied, socio-cultural and ecological processes. Our aim is to illuminate the interdependence of learners and their contexts, in intimate life, in wider social experience and with reference to the 'natural' world. We suggest the complexity, non-linearity, and emergent quality of consciousness, in which change and transformation are constant. We also draw attention to the power of language and discourse and other social determinants in inhibiting processes of profounder learning, including how cultures shape individual lives and narrow educational space. When these aspects are neglected, adult learning is impoverished, alongside understanding of what facilitates or inhibits it. A satisfyingly complex theory of transformation is required in education, social care, and in diverse interventions, and even in politics, so as to provide a better foundation for more effective, ecologically sensitive, ethical and imaginative practice.

We decided to investigate our own diversity (in terms of gender, culture, language, theoretical background, etc.) to build a reflexive dialogue through writing, also drawing on trans-cultural (Anglo-Saxon, Italian, German and French, among others) academic literature. This paper represents a theoretical and reflexive introduction to a major project, where we will use case studies, autoethnographic writing, and emblematic stories from our own experience and auto/biographical research (West, 1996; 2001; Formenti, 2014; West, 2016) to gain a deeper, embodied, experience-based,

and critical understanding of our own theories, and underlying assumptions. Dialogic, collaborative writing provides ‘multiple understanding of the world’ (Norris, Sawyer, 2012) enacting the principle of ‘double or multiple description’ (Bateson, 1979) to explore, for instance, the interdisciplinary psychosocial concept of self-recognition, as a new way of understanding the dynamics of transformation in the context of intimate relationships, in groups and with reference to wider social dynamics (Honneth, 2007; 2009; West, 2014).

### **Linden**

I presented a paper in a symposium on transformative learning, a short while ago, at a European conference in Berlin. We were asked to interrogate ideas of transformative learning, which I did through the frame of what I call auto/biographical narrative research using interdisciplinary psychosocial theoretical perspectives. We were asked to consider the relevance of transformative learning to contemporary debates about adult learning and education in difficult, stressful times, where their purpose is too often reduced to highly instrumental labour market and consumerist ends. Was there something new and helpful in the transformative literature to enable Europeans to think more deeply and comprehensively about learning and education in late-modernity?

It was and still is an important challenge given how educational systems, as Bourdieu so starkly illuminated, remain stubbornly reproductive of the existing social order. Yes, of course, there are students who progress to and can prosper in the highest echelons of the university system, but their very success seems to reinforce the reactionary idea that the system is open to all the talents *if only people work hard enough*. The argument is sustained in the face of pervasive, crippling social inequalities across countries and continents. So if we are to use words like transformative, especially for the majority of peoples, we need very serious conversations inter alia about diverse structural as well as psychological constraints.

### **Laura**

I remember the conference in Berlin. The air was electric with challenges, curiosity and some tensions: North Americans and Europeans from different countries, all in the same room, trying to make a conversation about learning, trying not to be ‘colonialists’, however bringing with them all their presuppositions, past history, language gaps, and maybe some clichés. By the way, I was struck by the gender composition of the symposium: one woman, many men. After the conference, a special issue of the Journal of Transformative Education was published (Formenti, Dirkx, 2014). For me, it was the beginning of this journey into TL. I see it as a possibility for intercultural dialogue. But dialogue needs efforts.

### **Linden**

Going back to Berlin, I remember a distinguished colleague who was far from impressed with my interest in transformative learning. ‘Changes in mind set’, ‘Mezirow’, he mused; ‘is there anything conceptually distinctive here in relation to European conversations about good education or really significant learning, individually or collectively?’

There were many questions from the audience: ‘Changes in mind-set? Is that sufficiently embodied or biographical?’ ‘How does TL relate to the traditions of the Frankfurt School and questions as to why serious, critical thinking is difficult and constrained?’ ‘What does ‘transformative learning’ have to say about education in a neo-liberal world of growing inequalities, xenophobia, racism and fundamentalism?’ ‘What might Mezirow’s writing add to the rich historical traditions of popular education, in both North America and Europe, with authors like Raymond Williams or Edward Lindeman? They illuminated where resources of hope might lie as part of a broader project to reinvigorate democracy itself, especially its participative dimensions.’

‘Maybe we need a new emphasis on collective struggle, over generations, to transform the social order, rather than worrying about individual mind-sets’, a colleague continued.

‘Moreover, what of our work, Linden, on lifewide and lifelong learning, including a concept like ‘biographicity’ as the fundamental challenge we all face in late modernity? Biographicity as the struggle to compose a life, and some agency, on more of our own terms, in the company of others, if never in conditions of our own choosing. Don’t these ideas take us into deeper relational, embodied and embedded territory?’ ‘All the talk about transformation can appear very individualistic, neo-liberal even, in a characteristically North American way’.

The conversations troubled me. I thought of how transformative learning has gained popularity in educational rhetoric. Even becoming a kind of consumerist fetish: ‘change and transform’ or you will be left behind as a dinosaur or Luddite, bringing echoes of social Darwinism and educational commodification. Transformative learning can degenerate into little more than a marketing slogan to enable educational institutions to sell their products. We are all transformative institutions now, proclaim colleges, schools, universities, or the corporate world of management training. The idea becomes all things to all people and evacuated of meaning.

The conversation with the specific colleague touched on other challenges to the term in the educational literature (Newman, 2010). At the time I responded by saying that I join in conversations when they seem interesting with many people, in diverse academic communities, including psychoanalysis, critical theory, and even spirituality as well as transformative learning. Conversations about the prerequisites of profounder human and educational experience, which may encompass wrestling with deeply disorientating dilemmas and hard fought changes in mind-set. All informed by an auto/biographical sensibility (see West, 2014 and 2016). In the transformative learning ‘community’ I found similar concerns to my own, about for instance understanding more of the human condition and how education can appeal to and draw on our better angels. There are a number of colleagues who challenge the evacuation and the reification of the term, but continue to insist it has utility (see Brookfield, 2000, for instance). In North America as well as Europe, there are ways of framing transformative learning as a critical element in struggles for social justice and for creating a democratic citizenry; framings giving emphasis to the social rather than the individual, or at least to the interdependence of both.

Scholars like Stephen Brookfield have taken Jack Mezirow’s work very firmly into the political and critical domain. Disorientating dilemmas can encompass, as Brookfield and Holt (2011) argue, collective, cooperative and democratic changes but of course

they can also evoke deeply reactionary thoughts and extreme xenophobic, even fascistic tendencies. We need to think, with others, about how and why this happens; maybe to challenge the too frequent separation of mind and body, thoughts and feelings, in accounts of significant learning. They are a unit in which feeling is central to thinking, and creative responses to change are deeply dependent on our relationships and how these enable us to manage the emotional dissonance disorientation brings (West, 2016).

There are feminist scholars too, like Belenky and Stanton (2000), who challenge the neglect of gendered inequities, oppression, and power in writing about transformative processes. They note how communication contexts are too often understood in overly masculinist ways, with separate, competing ‘rational’ people in search of the most valid idea in the ideal speech community. They present, as an alternative, a more feminist idea of connected, empathic and co-operative learners searching to make sense of why individuals may think and feel as they do.

A breaking of collective mind sets is urgently required to appreciate the consequences of our actions – in building cities, holiday resorts or changes to landscapes, in ways that have calamitous consequences for many species, including ours. Transformative learning can involve a deepening, heart-felt, engaged, imaginative as well as critical change in mind-set, which includes appreciation of complex systems of interdependence and of our capacity for solipsistic, mind-less destruction.

Processes of authentic transformation are, in these terms, elements in a larger struggle for new ways of thinking, being, seeing and interacting, encompassing body, spirit, mind and soul. This can be a profoundly political project of learning to be and act in courageous, imaginative, interconnected and agentic ways. If our present world groans for more inclusive, relational, socially just, and even spiritually aware and sustainable understandings of transformative learning, there are many and diverse people who write in such terms in the transformative communities of North America and Europe.

## **Laura**

I also have a story that illuminates my idea of transformation:

*1999, January or February. University, my office.*

*She is very young, clean-cut. Red blotches on her skin and neck reveal bridled emotions. She hands out her test to me, while asking with a broken voice: “How is it possible that I ONLY got a 19/30?!?”*

*She looks offended. I examine the paper. Ah yes. I remember this test. I had warned students to answer all questions. In this case, one out of three was left blank.*

*“Nevertheless I studied so much, I always got the highest grades at school. The two answered questions are really good”.*

*True, but why didn’t she answer this one? “Give your own definition of education and discuss it”: it is a beautiful question! My favourite among the three, I confide to her.*

*“I know all the theories of education, I could give you any definition, from Plato to Rousseau and Paulo Freire, but not mine. I do not have MY OWN definition”.*

*I am amazed. How is it possible to know so many definitions and not be able to*

*squeeze out any idea? After all it's easy – I suggest – all you have to do is to think.*

*“No way! You do not have the right to ask me to think!”*

I wonder if that student changed her mind, afterwards, if she learned “to think like an adult” (Mezirow, 2000). Would she dare, as an educator, to ask people whom she meets to travel the whole journey of learning, difficult and yet simple, where mature adults *take a position* in the process of knowing, then *move* within it, as well as *change their rhythm and modality* of movement, and lastly are able to *go beyond*? Maybe that incident, at the start of her academic career, announced a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991), one of those critical and blessed moments that propitiate transformative learning. It was for me, undoubtedly. It shook beliefs, premises and values that I had given for granted until that moment. I asked myself, many times, if that dialogue was favourable to transformation, or, on the contrary, only confirming the ambitious student vs. demanding teacher clichés. These attributes, Bateson warns us (1972), are built and confirmed in relationships, emerging features of our conversations. My aim, in our dialogue, is to focus conversations on what constitutes the power to transform us.

Linden

Your story brings us back to the ‘banking concept’ of education, the neglect of the experiences and struggles of learners and the difficulty of learning *from* experience, rather than *about* it, in overly abstract ways, in Bion’s telling formulation (Youell, 2006). ‘Knowledge’, in other words - pre-ordained and pre-arranged – is to be deposited into the empty heads of students rather than drawing on what they know, and their experience and associated questions. An equally serious matter, as noted above, is the pervasiveness of meritocratic assumptions, even among radical educators. The point is to get more people into degree programmes, or their equivalent, but in ways that continue to leave many outside the walls. Historical concerns, as in popular education, to do with drawing all the people into educational spaces, as part of a project to build an informed, active, questioning citizenry, have been marginalised. Of course there are educators who combine a critique of meritocratic assumptions with that of the banking model. Freire, among the others, is at the heart of some of the discussions about TL, which augurs well for those who want to construct more collective understanding of transformation.

Laura

You are stressing the macro-social and structural constraints that partially explain what happened in that interaction. My story can be read in another way yet, to focus the meso level and *transformativity*, a concept that I use to celebrate TL as well as to go beyond it. After all, what matters in a (trans) formative process is the possibility to go beyond, to transcend. To learn “like an adult” means to position oneself, then to move, and learn how to change the rhythm and modality of our own movement within our previous knowing, and ultimately to go beyond all this. Transformativity may be a way to transcend Mezirow’s theory, now that he is gone, and a solid community of research and practice has been established.

Mezirow’s research was certainly fertile: he connected different perspectives on

learning, research traditions, trends and needs, composing them in a conceptual and practical system; he gave inspiration to many academics and professionals to search a more dynamic, integrated approach to adult learning and education; he started a lively community. In the US, the annual conference, the *Journal of Transformative Education*, the quality of publications witness the credibility and versatility of this theory, notwithstanding controversial. In Europe, the process has been slow and more restrained as you imply (Formenti, Dirkx, 2014).

Linden

I sort of agree, but there is a danger of neglecting history and a loss of meaning and sense in the trivial import of ideas: European traditions have much to offer; not least that of popular education, where space existed to think for oneself in the company of friends, as my own recent work illuminates.

Laura

I agree. And I wonder if diversity at large shouldn't be regarded as the real thing that needs to be celebrated, about Europe. We are suspicious of the rhetoric of "new" since the past teaches that nothing is really new. Let's try to interrogate what is transformative in such processes. The construction of a dialogic and complex model of transformative conversations could be among the future developments of the TL theory. There is a need to overcome the dominating perspective on learning, overly individualistic, anthropocentric and dualistic, based on separation of the learner from the environmental, social and relational context, even from her own body. These presuppositions can be questioned to favour a complex view of learning as a trans-individual and conversational process, not confined to the head or brain of isolated subjects.

An understanding of complexity (Alhadeff Jones, 2012) also invites us to broaden our sight, and shift from individual transformative learning to *transformativity*, as I said above, as an emergent feature of a system of relationships. If we are ready to acknowledge that adult learning always entails different subjects who necessarily learn in relation to the other, then they will need to learn together, and not separately, how to interrogate their mind sets. Learning happens in reciprocity and coordination: we need satisfying theories and practices to understand the "proximal system of learning", that is located at an intermediate (meso) level – between the micro (individual) and the macro (social) (Formenti, 2014). An ongoing conversation always is there, before, during and after any learning. This meso level accompanies us with everyday interactions that can propitiate or hinder learning. A family dinner, an exam at university, a research interview, even data analysis or writing for publication entail conversations that enact a network of inter-dependent relationships. What is the pattern connecting them? What patterns connect all of us, as learning adults?

The story I told says how the perspectives of meaning are built in an educational system based on measurement of performance. School experience is crucial in building the learner, it structures and constrains us; at school, we learnt much more than the *what* - contents, skills and competences fixed by the explicit curriculum. Learning *about* rather than *from* experience, in your terms Linden. Unconsciously, through day by day repetition of gestures, rituals and formulae, we learnt the context, i.e. the *how* of

learning. At this *embodied* and *enacted* level, each generation internalizes the perspectives and frameworks of meaning, the hidden metaphors that are used to *make sense* of learning. Today, this means to learn commodification, i.e. the hegemonic sense of learning: education is about receiving credits, to be spent in the labour market. Economic metaphors dominate. In the Greek *skolé* there were no grades, no credits; learning was strictly linked to life style, to making a good life. But this was, obviously, only for a narrow élite.

This *context* learning, regarding the way we learn to punctuate the sequences of experience (Bateson, 1972), is very near to *transformative learning*. A person who is raised in a Pavlovian context (conditioning), or instrumental learning (reward/punishment), or mechanic context, will anticipate similar contexts in the future:

“[...] experience of one or more contexts of the Pavlovian type results in the animal's acting in some later context as though this, too, had the Pavlovian contingency pattern. Similarly, if past experience of instrumental sequences leads an animal to act in some later context as though expecting this also to be an instrumental context, we shall again say that Learning II has occurred” (Bateson, 1972, p. 294)..

Bateson's theory of the logical levels of learning highlights the entrenchment of positions (states of dynamic equilibrium, level 0), movements (shift of the equilibrium point, level 1) and rhythms/modalities of shift (class/configuration/category change, level 2) that are featured by any learning, all the way to the most amazing and difficult transformation (level 3), that is going beyond, transcending (previous) learning, identity, and the here-and-now context. In this hierarchy, Learning 0 is the prerequisite of any learning. At each moment, we are the living demonstration of our capacity to get by in this world, to know and answer, without losing our auto-organization. As living organisms, we are part of “co-evolutionary units”, from which we depend, from birth to death. This constitutive dependence has to be strongly stated, to contrast a foolish dominant narrative, ready to convince us of a delusionary and dangerous idea of us as autonomous and self-sufficient adults.

Learning 1, the prevailing object of education, can happen by imitation, conditioning, memory, rewards and punishments, answer extinction, play, projects... the whole taming-and-teaching paraphernalia that teachers, educators, psychiatrist and parents must know very well (Bateson, 1972, p. 297). It is time-bound: living organisms, differently from machines, give a different answer in a different time. Be it copiously drooling, nicely writing and reading, or riding a bike and using a computer.

Every Learning 1 entails a context, i.e. inter-actions with objects, people, places, hence relationships that shape our “character” (misleadingly attributed to an individual per se, such as the “ambitious student” or the “demanding teacher”), “punctuations” (ways to segment an interaction, e.g. “since the student did not answer one question, she failed” vs. “the teacher asked an illegitimate question, so the student did not answer) and “relational patterns” (transference/countertransference: for the student, this episode could confirm previous experiences with “demanding” parents and teachers; the teacher can act coherently with her “gifted child” past experience, (see Miller, 1979). Character, punctuations and relational patterns are an outcome of Learning 2.

Linden

I think I go along with this, not least the importance and necessity of adaptation or Level 0 learning in human experience. That provides the basis for movement to the next levels. Notwithstanding, I am mindful, in very early experience of different qualities of interaction between humans, between prime care givers, say, and infants; agency, and the capacity for play, as Winnicott argued, can be there in very early experience as the world. If this is experienced as safe enough, secure, enabling the infant (and adult) to take risks and imaginatively to create whole worlds, in play, without worrying what others might think. So your different levels may be in play from the outset, but we are not good at articulating the complex experiences involved.

Laura

To learn how to “think like an adult” (Mezirow, 2000) we need for a certain kind of experience, i.e. a reframing of previous learning. The perspectives that are built through Learning 2 are difficult to eradicate, not least because we very rarely become aware of their existence and even then we tend to protect them (and ourselves) from dis-equilibrium; besides, we do not remember *how* we learnt them.

“Subjectively we are aware of [them] but unable to say clearly *how* this pattern was constructed nor what cues were used in our creation of it” (Bateson, 1972, p. 301).

Researching our own learning biography (Dominicé, 2000) is thus a reasonable thing to do, when it is aimed to re- and de-construct the paths of construction of our relationship to knowing. I am not saying, however, that it is necessary, or even possible, to gain total awareness. We are not able to word it all. The contact with our radical memory (Heron, 1996) and embodied mind (Varela, Thompson, Rosch, 1991), e.g. in autobiographic, sensorial, creative writing, and all aesthetic languages, nurturing our ability to “think in stories” (Bateson, 1979), opens space for *reflexivity* (Hunt, Sampson, 2006; Hunt, 2013), that differ from *reflection* in being rooted in the unconscious, mystery, wisdom (see also Tisdell, 2014). Among the critiques of Mezirow there is his early insistence on reflection, as the most aware, rational and cognitive dimension of adult learning, hence lessening the value of “soul work”, (Dirkx, Mezirow, 2006; Dirkx, 2012). To go beyond Mezirow means to integrate in our theories and practices the notion that an adult subject will at best be able to represent always and only a little part, if a complex one, of her learning path.

Learning 3 is a deep transformation of the character, of our way of punctuating, of our relational patterns, and the way we inhabit the world. It brings

“a greater flexibility in the premises acquired by the process of Learning II – a *freedom* from their bondage. [...] But any freedom from the bondage of habit must also denote a profound redefinition of the self”. (Bateson, 1972, p. 304).

**Linden**

I think profound experiences of self can be there from the outset and patterns in our relationships become embodied in our neurological system; the word, or feeling made



flesh, for instance. I suppose I want to question how much this may be simply an adult quality.

### **Laura**

Maybe you are right, and we are too adult- and anthropo-centred. We need to think thoroughly about this. The hubris of mankind was one of Bateson's preoccupations. But let me go back to my story, to focus a further point: the student took a position in the context as if it was instrumental and I interpreted it in a "Batesonian" way. Our meeting enacted a dilemma, generated by a clash of opposing frameworks (Sclavi, 2003). Isn't it a surprise, for many students in HE, to realize that they can think? However, the surprise is also on the other side: some teachers neutralize it, by labelling the student as inadequate. But I was obliged, being a pedagogist, and with complexity as my credo, to question the context. So: who was the one, in this conversation, to go into a crisis, long and deep enough to produce transformative learning? Were the two of us able to understand each other, and to foster reciprocal learning by dialoguing, by going beyond the impasse, not to say conflict? What kind of conversations do we need, to sustain transformation? Not all conversations are generative.

A transformative conversation should entail the possibility to criticize the learning contexts, to take a distance from roles and rituals, and to challenge fixed rules. This is not economic at all, it poses problems, it requires cognitive and emotional energies, it puts us at risk. Why should we want it, what is the "reward"?

The hegemonic, empiricist, anglo-centric tradition, overly individualistic and event-based, nurtures Ego-ism and reification of learning, while eco-systemic and complexity theories celebrate learning as emerging from inter-actions in contexts. As Bateson (1972, 1979) stated, learning is not dualistic: on one side a teaching unit (be it a person, an object, or the world out there), on the other side a learning unit (the individual, separated from interactions). Learning is not in the head, or behaviours, but in the circularity of constraints and possibilities, actions and reactions, different organisms bringing different perspectives. In this ongoing dialogue, stories are told, shared, interpreted by the human actors, and they play a crucial role.

To conclude and to begin

Laura is suggesting that dialogic understanding (more appropriate than the abused term "co-construction") of lived experience makes it possible to think in stories and aesthetic presentation. It nurtures a terrain where deliberate actions and shared processes can flourish. Transformativity grows, at a system level, if different forms of knowing are welcome, celebrated, and cultivated: biographic, experience-based, embodied knowing, together with symbolic, presentational, performative knowing, as well as the more academic, propositional, and theoretical, up to the practical forms of knowing, to be enacted in the "real world". New, critical and creative scenarios of research, where all participants are researchers and researchers view themselves as adult learners, seem to be able to nurture transformativity. They aim to produce awareness and active participation also in readers, as parts of the systemic process of research and learning. This is going beyond, too. Beyond printed paper, outside there, in the world, looking for clues of transformativity, opening doors to new dialogic learning experiences. Searching into adult learning, we are involved and responsible,

as adult apprentices, to go beyond what was already told and to open possibilities (maybe) toward a better living.

Linden, on the other hand, does not want to confine such processes to adult learning; and he is also troubled by a reality of growing inequality, xenophobia, fundamentalism, and armed conflict; of anti-learning and retreat into infantilism/fundamentalisms in our contemporary world, and the deep-seated insecurities underlying this. The lack of a solid core of selfhood, to put it slightly differently, which has to be viewed, as Laura states, relationally and systemically. What we are wrestling with is not so much the development of transformativity, but of its marginalisation for most of the people, for most of the time. TL needs to encompass a more explicit lifelong but also political dimension, sensitive to the play of globalisation, finance capital, and the instabilities this entails, working at a very primitive, emotional level too. But this is not a melancholic yearning for a lost world, or progressive narrative; rather to consider how theories of transformative learning can encompass the interdependence of micro-level, meso and the macro in facilitating cohesive, agentic, questioning and moral citizens, from earliest experience; with both political but also ecological as well as relational sensibilities; the task is enormous. But we need to start with us, with our biographies, with our own primitive experience, and with what has constrained as well as inspired us.

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