

## Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning and Freire's Pedagogy: Theories in Dialogue

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### Abstract

Jack Mezirow (1923-2014) and Paulo Freire (1921-1997) are two of the most important contributors to understanding adult learning. Mezirow (Bloom, 2015) frequently acknowledged the impact that Freire had on his thinking and one can wonder if there is a distance between the critical consciousness of Freire and the critical reflection of transformative learning. This study is restricted to the works of Freire and Mezirow and engages in a critical dialogue about their contribution. It does not focus on the multiple ways in which each has been amplified and reinterpreted by sympathetic scholars. These are the main focus of the study: an autobiographical moment; a look at Dewey as the precursor of both Freire and Mezirow; Hegel's influence; a theological moment that divides the two educators; their contributions to teaching methods useful in critical pedagogy.

### Introduction: Auto/biography

Jack Mezirow was my academic supervisor at Teachers College from 1978. That year he published the first journal article on perspective transformation (1978b). The theory emerged from an empirical research project (Mezirow, 1978a) but also relied on the learning experiences of his wife Edee at Sarah Lawrence College, New York (Mezirow, 1981). Her reading of *The self in transformation* (Fingarette, 1963) influenced his theory of transformative learning. Fingarette explores ideas from psychoanalysis, existentialism and religious thinking and is one of the sources for the concepts 'meaning scheme' and 'transformation' (Fingarette, 1963, pp. 21-29). His selective use of sources (Fleming, 2018), that do not emphasise a social dimension, is the reason for some of the critiques of Mezirow's work. It is ironic that, borrowing from Fingarette, who was engaged with mysticism and religion, Mezirow did not engage easily in the possibilities that emerged from the work of Dirx (2012) on soul, from the theological orientation of Freire (1974), and the work of Habermas (2008) reclaiming the role of religion in the public sphere (Portier, 2011).

Paulo Freire (Freire Institute, 2022) also acknowledges the key role his wife Elsa and later Ana Maria Araújo played in his work. During a Summer School at Boston College in 1982 Freire introduced his wife Elsa as his collaborator, and the source of some of his most important

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ideas such as 'conscientization' (Fleming, 1982). All theory may be autobiographical; all research and indeed teaching may be autobiographical. This autobiographical aspect of work is under explored in adult education literature.

We know a great deal about the early life of Paulo Freire and his times in Recife (Freire Institute, 2022). In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Freire (2016) clearly states how his thinking is rooted in his native place where he sat Under the Mango Tree (the original title of *Pedagogy of the Heart*). This is his safe place for thinking:

I find refuge under its shade when I am there alone, secluded from the world and others, asking myself questions, or talking to myself. My talks are not always triggered by my questions (2016, p.1)

From this shaded place his explorations progress and he (2016) states that:

I am first a citizen of Recife. The more rooted I am in my location the more I extend myself to other places so as to become a citizen of the world. No one becomes local from a universal location. (p. 8)

His work in the education system of Brazil, especially as Secretary of Education in Sao Paulo from 1989-1991 (Shor, et al., 2017), shows his commitment to educational reform. Mezirow also engaged in policy work but his contribution to education in Thailand and Pakistan is under reported. Mezirow only occasionally, and in private conversations, made reference to his childhood in Fargo, North Dakota. In an age when personal experience and narratives of one's life are frequently included in educational discourse these missing connections are notable - as I continue to argue that theory, teaching and research are grounded in one's autobiography.

### **The Plan**

This study acknowledges the work of Vaikousi (2020) but highlights the radical dimension where affinities and divergences are more sharply focused. In addition to this autobiographical moment, this paper will outline the work of Dewey and Hegel as precursors for the contributions of Mezirow and Freire. Then the theological oriented pedagogy of Freire is an important diverging set of commitments and insights is explored and finally the approach of both authors to the practical field of teaching methods.

### **Mezirow and Freire: Affinities with John Dewey**

The emancipation that each author promised through learning is grounded in the freedom to think critically, understand in mutually respectful dialogue with others and act individually or collectively to change the world. Key sources of ideas for Mezirow's work, such as John Dewey (1966), are reprised by Kokkos (2020). However, others had important influences, especially Jürgen Habermas (2008), Alfred Schutz (1970), Jerome Bruner (1970), George Kelly (1963), Herbert Blumer (1969) and Thomas Kuhn (1970). Mezirow relied heavily on Habermas. Freire did not (Morrow & Torres, 2002).

In contrast, Freire relies on Hegel, Marx, Erich Fromm, Franz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg, Simon de Beauvoir, Erich Fromm, Louis Althusser, Che Guevara, Georg Lukács, and also John Dewey. This is a significant dividing line between Mezirow and Freire and these allies provide a map of their convergences (Dewey), but mostly divergences.

This is a synopsis of Freire's pedagogy: Peoples' humanity has been stolen or denied (through alienation, and oppression); by oppressors; supported by an unjust system from which powerful classes benefit at others' expense; in time the struggle to become more human asserts itself; and people reclaim their power in a process of dialogic learning through which all might be liberated. Mezirow focused on identifying the uncritically assimilated cluster of assumptions that underpins the pursuit of meaning; the search for new assumptions and meanings to inform actions.

Freire's work emerged as a response to the failure of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism that silences the expression of experience by citizens in the public sphere. Learning is not possible without expressing experience. Though Mezirow relies on Habermas and his interpretation of democracy as communicative action he is rarely as concerned as Freire with the demise of democracy. Transformative learning addresses the instrumentalization of learning - in this Freire and Mezirow are connected. Transformative learning is a way of advancing democracy as outlined by Dewey and amplified by Mezirow rather than an explicit way of progressing a political and social agenda, as in Freire. Freire was against the dehumanizing epistemology of knowledge and Mezirow against the instrumentalization of knowledge and learning (Darder, 2018).

Dewey is a constant point of connection between our two protagonists (see Raikou & Karalis, 2020). The different connections that each makes with Dewey gives each a unique orientation. Freire emphasizes Dewey's contributions on classroom interactions between teacher and student that are to be democratic - an experience in conjoint living. Freire was interested in democratic experiences that the school could potentially model by including in the school curriculum discussions about topics of interest to the local community and society. Dewey became one of the most famous proponents of hands-on learning or experiential education, which is related to, but not synonymous with experiential learning. He (1916) critiqued schooling that did not prepare citizens for ethical participation in society, but instead, cultivated passive pupils via insistence upon mastery of facts. Rather than preparing students to be reflective, capable of arriving at social truths through critical and intersubjective discourse, schools prepared students for docile compliance with authoritarian work practices and political structures, thus discouraging the pursuit of individual and communal inquiry. This Dewey critique emerged in Freire's work as 'banking education' (Freire, 1970, p. 59). Some of Mezirow's and Freire's best ideas are literally those of Dewey, such as: fostering a democratic mind set through education; that in adult education social change could be explored and implemented; that each student should have an active role in their learning, and education.

Freire and Mezirow valued open minded teachers, leading debates out of which shared explorations and new knowledge would emerge that in turn would be of assistance in changing society. Dewey, Freire and Mezirow emphasized learning from experience. Dewey defined education as the 'continual reorganizing, reconstructing and transforming of experience' (Dewey, 1966, p. 76). This is another source for the concept of transformation. In *How we think* Dewey (1933) sees education as 'the transformation of more or less casual curiosity and sporadic suggestion into attitudes of alert, cautious, and thorough inquiry' (p.50) and the outcome of thinking is 'the transformation of a *dubious* and perplexing situation into a *settled*, or determinate, one' (p. 84). In summary, Mezirow's concept of transformation may be characterized as the transformation of experience and Freire's characterized as the critical pedagogy of experience.

Freire was in every way a radical humanist and socialist and as member of the Workers Party embraced such descriptors. Mezirow resisted being called a socialist. In the ways that Freire's work is applied, it is not unusual to lose this radical dimension and, in the ways transformative learning is applied, it is difficult to keep alive the social change dimension. But they do diverge about the idea of the dialectic as useful in understanding the creation of knowledge and learning.

### **Freire, Mezirow and Hegel:**

In chapter one of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire (1970) states that, borrowing from Hegel, the ontological vocation of human beings is to become more human. Freire also borrowed from Hegel his ideas on 'dialectical' thinking (1970, p. 34). This make Freire a challenging read. Mezirow, like Dewey, missed the importance of the Hegelian dialectic, possibly because Dewey did not thoroughly grasp the importance of the concept until late in his life. This is a fault line and divergence between Freire and Mezirow – a weakness possibly in Mezirow's potential to be radical. Dewey (in Menand, 2002) wrote:

I can see that I have always been interpreting dialectic wrong end up, the unity as the reconciliation of opposites, instead of the opposites as the unity in its growth.... I don't know as I give the reality of this at all... it seems so natural & commonplace now, but I never had anything take hold of me so. (p. 313)

As a result of Freire's grasp of the dialectic, he was able to resolve the traditional dualisms of Western philosophy - teaching/learning, thinking/action, and subject/object. The idea that the teacher and learner teach and learn was well grasped by Mezirow but he did not integrate dialectical thinking into his own theory. In fact, Freire uses *praxis* to name how he resolved the dualism of thought and action. But there, in Dewey's weakness, rests the roots of Mezirow's inability to integrate this idea into his thinking. Hegel remains a step too far for most adult educators.

Mezirow and Freire are in their mutual reliance on Karl Marx, citizens of their times. Mezirow was part of trend in the 1970s academic and popular literature in the US to better understand Marx's concept of alienation. Bertell Ollman (1971), Shlomo Avineri (1968), Richard Schacht

(1970) and a recent translation of Marx (1964) were on Mezirow's reading lists at Teachers College. But in contrast Freire highlighted class consciousness, the concept of labour and false consciousness. Conscientization according to Freire points to the process of becoming aware of one's social class and of the roles that class and race (and in his later years gender) play in society. False consciousness involves the state of believing that one is not exploited or that by working harder, for instance, one will achieve some kind of economic freedom.

Both Freire and Mezirow provide difficult reading, material partially explained, iterative understandings of their own work as well as papers and journal articles written to address queries disagreements and the continuing need to clarify, explain and elaborate. The former offers social freedom and freedom from false ideologies, unequal distributions of power and social inequalities. The later offers freedom from distorting and unquestioned assumptions.

They did however share a mutual interest in achieving social justice through literacy and though the social dimension is more difficult to see in Mezirow, those who knew him will attest to social justice as an overarching concern (Fleming, 2016). Freire's critical literacy clarifies the connection between knowledge and power (Shor, 1999) and in his critical pedagogy literacy work is a 'war of position', as Gramsci asserts (quoted in Mayo, 2008, p. 422). For Mezirow literacy is more like the *Last Gamble on Education* (Mezirow, et al., 1975). Yet neither would disagree that their shared task continued to be the learning processes that moves peoples' awareness from submerged and uncritical frames of reference to take critical actions that will make the world a fairer and more caring place.

Transformative learning theory leaves itself open to the critique that critical reflection is difficult, abstract and overly rational. Freire from the beginning focused on the priority of love, and respect in the critical dialogues of his culture circles. But Mezirow did not, at least in his writings, emphasize the intersubjectivity that necessarily underpins critical reflection. Habermas is acutely aware of this underpinning of rationality and discourse.

Discourse and transformative learning require intersubjectivity. Habermas (1992) states that the rational potential in linguistic practice is based on sound intersubjectivity that is a 'glimmer of symmetrical relations marked by free, reciprocal recognition' (p. 145). Communicative action, discourse and critical reflection are firmly grounded in the mutuality of intersubjectivity. (Fleming, 2022b, p. 30)

This clearly anticipates the emergence of this major theme in Honneth (Fleming, 2022a). An exploration of the links with Gramsci, much quoted by Freire, and not so much by Mezirow, would lead to similar conclusions. Without mapping the main influences of Gramsci on Freire, suffice it to say that this would highlight the role of hegemony in producing and maintaining fault lines in society that support and divide vested interests from others – a false consciousness. The set of beliefs or ideas that are widely accepted in society but which justify, and place beyond questioning the interests of powerful people in society defines hegemony - the glue that hold society together (Gramsci, 1971). Adult education, in Gramsci's language, is a site of resistance. Ignoring these contradictions is to live in a 'culture of silence' where the

experiences of students are suppressed (Freire, 1970, p. 14). Together Gramsci and Hegel are powerful allies of the pedagogy of Freire and certainly not of Mezirow.

### **Theology and Freire but not Mezirow**

Before Habermas (2008) turned his attention to the post secular society and rethinking the role of religious perspectives in the public sphere (Morrow & Torres, 2002), Freire was both a published author in theological journals and a committed Christian. Gutierrez (1971), a liberation theologian referenced Freire as a source for understanding 'conscientization' (p. 92) and 'praxis' (p. 234) in his own work on Liberation Theology. By 1974 Freire published in a theology journal specializing in conscientization, *Crosscurrents* (Freire, 1974). Freire continues to attract attention as these ideas are experienced as powerful within the radical Christian tradition. Too many ignore how Freire re-constructs and integrates radical hermeneutics of biblical texts with his pedagogy of social transformation. Freire's ideas include opting for the poor; an awareness of the prophetic literature with its denouncing and announcing role in society; emphasizing such obviously biblical concepts as love, hope, faith, speaking the word and indeed framing some of his pedagogical work in theological terms. The power of the spoken word as a naming and creative force was central to the biblical Genesis as well as the opening paragraph of the Gospel of John (The beginning was the word...). The God of Freire's faith takes the side of the oppressed. In this regard Freire has contributed to a 'Theology of the Oppressed' and so diverges from Mezirow.

### **Teaching Methods**

The learning outline by both Freire and Mezirow involves having particular kinds of conversations. Freire, in contrast to Mezirow, is too often reduced to a teaching methodology with suggestions for coding, decoding, and learning how to have egalitarian discussions that ignore the imperative for social change. It is not easy to find teaching methodologies in Mezirow's work, partly because he concentrated on setting the conditions for discussion and the rules for discourse. He had little interest in methodology, apart from 'breaching':

The research technique used by ethnomethodologists called "breaching" for studying meaning perspectives might also be used as an effective instructional method to foster perspective transformation.

(Mezirow, 1981, p. 19)

Mezirow's edited collection (Mezirow & Associates, 1990) includes many contributions on how to teach (and undertake research). On the other hand, Freire is often reduced to a methodology for teaching and understandably many recommendations for teaching can be found in his work.

Mezirow's interest in how we think and in setting the conditions for particular kinds of conversations is important for this moment when we seem to have great difficulty holding conversations - especially with people with whom we disagree. Each shows an interest in the way learning begins. For Freire it is a moment of problematizing and for Mezirow this is a

disorienting dilemma. They are both in harmony with great philosophers of education such as Socrates who is credited by Plato with this phrase: ‘...philosophy begins in wonder...’ (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155c-d). This is reminiscent of Dewey’s statement that ‘perplexity’ leads to learning (Dewey, 1966, p. 150).

Freire was primarily and always a social actor, a political operative and active agent of change. One has to dig a bit deeper in Mezirow’s work to discover this possibility. As a result of his time with Roger Gould he was more inclined to focus on the learning one could recognize as psychological or personal and focus on the learning that might emerge from psychotherapy as in Gould’s (2022) computer assisted counselling (long before the on-line learning).

Teaching methods are at the core of Freire’s work in the field, in lecturing, in teaching and above all in his publications. *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Freire, 1973) is an example. So too are the many who have (Kirkwood & Kirkwood (1989) Ira Shor (1980), Hope and Timmel (2003), etc. as well as Brookfield (2016). But it is important to see what they have in common, an interest in dialogues and critical conversations that make a difference.

Freire worked mostly with people who had literacy problems, building his pedagogical program around their needs and aiming to strengthen their actions and free them from the shackles of socio-political oppression. For many teachers of adults, the idea that teachers would ideally move to a more indirect or student led teaching process is very attractive. Indeed, many quote Freire and Mezirow as proponents of a more facilitative approach, less banking, and more dialogue. But where does one draw the line? Both try to navigate this line between teaching as directive and as non-directive. We ask how this line is navigated by each in their different ways? Do they offer well thought out positions for us to follow? Chambers (2019) addresses this question and answers yes on both philosophical and methodological grounds.

For Freire and Mezirow the teacher is against banking, rejects manipulating students and their thinking but they do not support abdicating the directness that often remains hidden in their works. The responsibilities of a teacher are important and an openness about one’s agenda as a teacher is a clear form of directness. Utilizing didactics and outside experts are good examples of how this line appears to be broken through by Freire. This is a form of non-authoritarian directness. It is in contrast to what either would see as the abdication of responsibility. Mezirow was clear that the fact that teachers are paid to teach (often the student has paid to be taught) has direct consequences for being direct as against being indirect. Freire phrased this differently, saying that the teacher is never neutral. This directness should not contradict the freedom and capacity of the student to investigate reality. Mayo creates the valid distinction between the authority of the teacher as an expert, paid to teach, as against the ‘authoritarianism’ that so many fear (Mayo, 1999, p. 67). Authoritarianism, in this context, involves crushing and eliminating expressions of the experience of citizens and learners in the public sphere. In this way authoritarianism prevents learning.

Freire says to students, 'yes, I know you don't know' and that becomes 'So I do know, so why do I know, and you don't know? I went to school, university, etc. Why did you not go?' Or 'the education received by the oppressed is designed by the ruling class but is not the education received by the ruling class' (Fleming, 1982). Freire's educational method is based on the systematic study of the daily life of those who cannot read and write and worked through a process of 'coding' and 'decoding'. Decoding is an act of knowing that enables learners to penetrate reality and understand it in a critical way. The transformation of reality is possible as long as the trainers participate as equals with the trainees in a real dialogue that redefines the understanding of problems. Freire's pedagogy does not take anything for granted and no one as the only carrier of knowledge. Teachers strive together for the acquisition of knowledge and for critical awareness. The radicality of Freire's proposal lies in the fact that it argues that the subject of education and knowledge is not the teacher or the student, but the teacher-student relationship.

### **Misunderstandings and Contradictions**

The ideas of both Freire and Mezirow are easily grasped in superficial ways and both were aware that they were offering something complicated and easily misunderstood. This is clear from an interview with Paulo Freire in *The Irish Times* in 1981:

Lots of different groups of people, sometimes Christian and very naively Christian, worked and developed some kind of action which they called 'conscientization' as if the process of implementation could become a kind of aspirin for the so-called poor people.

We sometimes perceive the discovery of a praxis with the name conscientization though with a total character of manipulation on the part of those doing the action.

I could not prevent institutions and groups from pronouncing my name, from saying they were working according to the ideas of Paulo Freire, but I would have to do something to defend the process, the concepts and ideas I [was] trying to develop.

I will not say that everybody who uses me really agrees with me – no it's not necessary. Nor will I say that everybody who speaks very well about me is really understanding me. No, that wouldn't be normal.

(Kirby 1981)

It is a challenge to understand the radical Marxist liberation theory of Freire or the radical political and social transformation he was promoting. On the one hand so many easily grasped his ideas about banking, dialogue, teachers learning and learners teaching, literacy for all. These phrases captured the imagination of many educators and gave expression to a deep desire to humanize education and make its policies and practices well grounded. Teaching methods are too easily adopted and treated as a tool kit or how to do it. On the other hand, Freire has left a philosophically dense and insightful body of work that was always focused on the social and political transformation of society through learning and education. It is also

easy to adopt a transformative learning (Mezirow) approach as the concept of transformation and the possibilities implied by this have become popular ideas in ordinary conversation. But all these concepts have a more technical and nuanced meaning than those at play in ordinary language. Reductionist versions of each set of theories are common as are declarations that one is following a Freirean method or a transformative learning approach to teaching.

Teacher and student teach and learn is not always seen as the dialectical process it is and how it ushers in a new epistemology that re-constructs how knowledge (learning) is created in a dialectical dialogue. New knowledge is best created in a teacher-student discourse.

Transformative learning misconstrues, more often than not, how the individual and the social/political are connected. This link has been lost because transformative learning has been instrumental in how it relates to critical theory. Transformative learning borrows from Habermas but it does not look at the entire orientation of the Frankfurt School. This is partly because critical theory and particularly the Frankfurt School publications were not as accessible to an English-speaking world as they are today and because America is not really, as an education system in general, open to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

Freire as a Brazil citizen in the Global South was in sharp contrast to those who articulate transformative learning in the North and this more often means that colonial analysis is more to the fore in Freire than in TL literature.

Neither Freire nor Mezirow's work have become drivers or informers of public policy in European countries. Many have instead jumped on the lifelong learning bandwagon that is mostly empty of critical ideas and instead full of economic speak and social equality.... this is a problematic situation as the best ideas that inform our field are ignored by policy positions (Fleming, 2021). However, there are some exceptions and particular subsections of the field of adult education such as literacy have been more successful at this inclusion of transformative learning and Freire in its work.

### **Suggestions for educational research and practice**

It is worth considering that researching might stop searching for a method, a technique, a measure or most accurately a test for assessing whether transformative learning or critical reflection has occurred. This may be a further channeling of transformative learning into an epistemological *cul-de-sac* where an instrument is sought to measure something that is not amenable to being measured in an instrumental fashion.

So much research in transformation theory is in the category of a 'self-reported transformation'. If I said I had a transformative experience...then I did! It is not easy to have a transformative learning experience but the assessment needs to be more thorough and objective than to rely on a self-report.

Again and again, we need to do what Freire did so well: latch on the best thinking that is available now.... Piketty, Giroux, Chomsky, Habermas, Nussbaum, Nancy Fraser, Stiglitz as we borrow heavily from other disciplines, like Freire did and make these current analyses serve

our present understanding. Mezirow was a relentless gatherer of ideas and concepts from other authors who supported his theory – Belenky, Kegan, etc. This work needs to continue too. New insights from neuroscience seem promising. From where is the next iteration of critical pedagogy or transformative learning going to emerge? A critical mass of practitioners, teachers, researchers, colleagues, friends will hopefully undertake theory building and empirical research on this agenda.

## Conclusion

The continuing success of ESREA, International transformative Learning Association and their respective conferences along with the work of the *Journal of Transformative Education* are all indications that this field is developing continuously. The important recent publication of the *Handbook of Learning for Transformation* (Nicolaidis, 2022) defines this shared field for a new generation of adult educators.

As this study commenced on an auto/biographical note it is relevant to conclude in that way. As the lifespan of our colleagues Mezirow and Freire is so short we are acutely aware of the brief window of opportunity afforded to these scholars to make a significant impact on the theory and practice of the field of adult education. I am struck by the age at which Mezirow first published his perspective transformation article in 1978. He was 55 and the expectation that a fully grown theory of TL might emerge in his lifetime may be abridge too far. There is a sense in both authors of things left unfinished, incomplete. This may lead to a sense that their work just stopped. But they await new generations of scholars, researchers and teachers to develop each and ensure they remain living theories. They are both more important as they are indigenous theories of learning and education – they are: Of adult education; By adult educators; For adult education.

In *Daring to Dream* Ana Maria Freire says that the neoliberal economy

Speaks about the need for unemployment, for poverty, for inequality. I feel it is our duty to fight against such fatalistic mechanical forms of comprehending history...if we allow ourselves to fall for the trickery of neoliberal economic discourses, which affirm realities of homelessness and poverty as inevitable, then opposition for change becomes invisible, and our role in fostering change becomes absent. (Freire, 2007, p. 4)

The task as in so many controversial areas may be to transcend the divides and seek a coalition of the usable ideas from both so that a new critical pedagogy might face and problematize the many dilemmas in the world.

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