Refining Adult Learners' Discursive Capacities:

A Response to the Current Epistemological Crisis through the Lens of Transformation Theory

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Abstract

The following article begins with the observation that both public discourses, as well as dialogue between adult learners within certain educational contexts, is frequently confined to competitive and strongly assertive claims, a characteristic which significantly diminishes the epistemological potential of the dialogical act. Drawing on the description of the current 'epistemological crisis' by Hoggan and Hoggan – Kloubert (2021), the article first attempts to show how this crisis is reflected in the understanding of the dialogical act among particular groups of adult learners. The article then tries to explore ways through which this understanding can be enriched and transformed into a more complex and multidimensional process. The central orientation of such a transition, is elaborated through the lens of Jack Mezirow's Transformation Theory (1991, 2000), thus growing out of an examination, as well as an effort to transform, the epistemological 'habits of mind' which characterize the learners' distorted perception of the dialogical act. The discussion of the learners' epistemological habits of mind, is followed by the attempt to set up a framework of discursive activities, which help learners actualize the above transformation, specifically to the way they articulate questions of value (that is, their value priorities and value assumptions). The suggested activities are geared towards cultivating the learners' awareness of evaluative and conceptual 'complexity', with the ultimate aim of allowing this awareness to strengthen their epistemic and discursive agency. The gradual cultivation of this agency is demonstrated through a range of practical examples, which are analysed in terms of their transformative, philosophical, and ethical dimensions. The learners' renewed understanding of the dialogical act, is finally related to their capacity to activate their 'reflective judgment' (see also Kant, 1790 / 1987 in Hoggan and Hoggan – Kloubert, 2021).

Keywords: epistemological crisis, dialogue and adult education, Transformation Theory, complexity, reflective judgment

1. Introduction

The widespread lack of consensus about what constitutes valid knowledge, as well as about the ways that are considered appropriate to acquire such knowledge, has been highlighted by Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert (2021) as the dominant epistemological 'crisis' of our times. As the writers note, there is a significant segment of citizens who discuss key issues of global importance, based only on *what* or *who* they believe, while disregarding the crucial aspect of examining and evaluating the methods and processes through which they end up having these beliefs (2021, p. 9). This particular imbalance becomes more apparent in two striking examples**:** the emergence of the anti-vaccine movement, as well as the binary, 'dualistic' view regarding climate change (2021, p. 9-10). It is characteristic that, about the latter, a choice to either 'believe or not believe' in human-induced global climate change, seems to be based – according to the writers – 'on one's political or religious identity', or because one '*believes* in science' (2021, p.10).

What is impressive here is that discussions around the validity of a certain factual claim (i.e what is factually true about climate change) appear to be heavily obstructed by the influence of specific normative and evaluative orientations (i.e. one 'should adhere to science', or one 'should prioritize the sayings of religion'). Surely, the relationship between the factual and the evaluative, plays a significant role in the emergence of the crisis designated above, however in this paper I would like to focus mostly on the evaluative dimension of this crisis, given that discussions around value, are themselves frequently characterized by a 'dualistic' and polemical form of competing statements, that is, statements that preclude any deeper conversations about how normative convictions are formed. As an adult educator, I have often observed that some learners tend to underestimate, or fail to realize, the importance of collaborative dialogue, as a highly useful means for shaping a mutually agreed upon acknowledgment of the value conflicts and value priorities, which are at stake in any given discussion about social policy or decision-making.

In what follows, I will attempt to substantiate the above observation, by presenting my experience with a range of adult learners within a particular educational context. Drawing on this experience, I will attempt to demonstrate my effort to analyse and transform the learners' distorted understanding of the dialogical act, by utilizing specific practices and concepts from the field of Adult Education. The methodological axis of this effort will be based on Jack's Mezirow's Transformation Theory (1991, 2000), which constitutes the most comprehensive theoretical attempt to systematize aspects of the field. At the same time, I will also draw on insights from the field of psychology (Kitchener in Mezirow 1991, Rogers in Rogers & Farson 1957, 2015, and Kegan in Mezirow 2000), as well as philosophy (Rachels, 2003, Kant, 1970 /1987 in Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2021), to illuminate the logic of certain analytical and practical aspects of the project.

2. Presentation and Analysis of the Problem

For the past three years, I have been teaching a module on 'Critical Thinking', in the General Education Program, at a private college in Athens. The course is obligatory for all students – who are mostly aged between 18 and 24 – and a significant part of our work consists of discussions revolving around issues of moral and socio-political interest. These discussions usually require an in-depth examination of the value assumptions of the participants (see examples below), however, this examination is seriously hampered, because students frequently just end up having debates, taking "for" or "against" sides, about a given issue under consideration. This binary, polarised form of dialogue seems to reproduce in the classroom, the restrictive understanding of public discourse designated above, since opposing statements of evaluative preferences appear to take precedence over any alternative understanding of the dialogical act.

Taking into consideration the students' particular stance towards the dialogical act, I tried to analyze their attitude by referring to the concepts of Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. More specifically, I tried to make use of the analytical distinction between (dysfunctional) 'points of view' and 'habits of mind', which this theory introduces (Mezirow, 2000, 2007, pp. 43-71), to make sense of the problem. According to Mezirow, there would be a possibility to transform both the students' wider mental predispositions (their 'habits of mind'), as well as the individual expressions[14] of these predispositions (the students' 'points of view'), as long as these were identified, critically reassessed and reframed, through alternative modes of action and understanding.

The simplistic understanding of dialogue as a form of debate between two opposing and finalized positions seemed to constitute a dysfunctional point of view that underestimated the *exploratory* and, therefore, *reflective* possibilities offered by a more comprehensive

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[14] Expressions of value, emotion, and behaviour – See Mezirow, 2000, 2007, p. 57.

understanding of the dialogical interaction. This dysfunctional point of view appeared to constitute a particular form of cognitive behavior, which confined the process of exploring knowledge, to an exclusive form of competing viewpoints. This kind of cognitive behavior could be further attributed to an epistemological 'habit of mind', concerning the way knowledge is formed, as well as the way the process of learning is understood: the students failed to realize that a more comprehensive understanding of the dialogical act, could *enrich* the ways through which they could learn how to think about a given issue. And, this epistemological habit of mind, could be also related to another one, of the same kind, which limited the students' understanding of 'learning' to its traditional forms: several students were often absent during the hours scheduled for discussion, reappearing only for my lectures, a fact which indicated that they considered the process of learning to spring mainly from the vertical transmission of knowledge from educator to learner, and not from their own research and inter-subjective interaction.

Both of the above epistemological habits of mind recalled significant aspects of what psychologist K.S. Kitchener refers to as 'epistemic premise distortions' (1983, 1990 and in Mezirow, 1991, pp.123-128), namely, the difficulties learners may have with coming to grips with the process of 'rational inquiry', as a presupposition for cultivating their reflective judgment (1983, 1990). My students, either in the form of assuming that they already possess a correct 'for or against' answer to a particular question, or in the form of referring to an authority (their teacher), as the bearer of a correct answer, seemed to resist and recoil from the complexity of the process of rational inquiry. As I understood it, this resistance could be attributed to the fact that, when it came to the question of what was 'true' about a certain issue under consideration, the students were frequently clinging to their direct subjective understanding, or that of an authority, because of their need to hold on to some kind of cognitive *certainty*. However, for a learner to realize that uncertainty is an integral part of the process of inquiry and that this process is itself fallible (although still useful), constitutes an important epistemological step.[15] To help my students take this step, the challenge which I decided to confront, was to try to familiarize them with elements of uncertainty, which their collaborative inquiry could entail. At the same time, I would have to set up the conditions for a kind of dialogical interaction that would be truly collaborative, to mitigate the students' need to cling to the certainty of their position, a need which usually led to the binary understanding of an issue mentioned above.

In this way, the objective of the activities that follow is two-fold: first, to establish a more cooperative framework for the dialogical act, and, second, to allow this framework to become a catalyst for the students' coming to terms with certain difficulties of the process of rational inquiry.

3. Building a Relevant Framework of Activities

The book recommended by the private college at which I am employed for teaching Critical Thinking is Diestler's *Becoming a Critical Thinker: A User Friendly Manual* (2012), and the 9th chapter of the particular book, which is entitled *"Fair-mindedness"*, includes an active listening exercise, created by psychotherapist Carl Rogers (p. 419 onwards). The participants are divided into pairs, with one member of each pair expressing their opinion about an issue, and the other expressing their own, after first having reformulated *in their own words*, the opinion

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[15] See also Kitchener on the seven stages of development of reflective judgment (1983, 1990). Moreover, see Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco CA: Jossey -Bass, for Mezirow's consideration of Kitchener's approach (pp. 123-128). Although Kitchener does not distinguish between reflection within different domains of learning (i.e. 'instrumental' and 'communicative' learning, in Mezirow 2000), and Mezirow points to this divergence from his own understanding, he considers the issues which Kitchener tackles in her analysis above (namely, questions of public policy), as comparable to the problems that pertain to his conceptualization of the domain of 'communicative' learning.

expressed by the former. Once both members have agreed on how they understand the issue at hand, the discussion between the participants moves forward, through continuous mutual efforts of rephrasing, so that each student's viewpoint, as well as the issue under consideration, becomes clearer to the other. What emerges through this exercise is a meticulous process of 'paraphrasing', to form a common ground of communication. As I explained to the students, each paraphrase could also be expressed in the form of a question.

The exercise took place in cases where opposing views were expressed during a discussion (with the discussion naturally being interrupted and postponed, in order for the exercise to be conducted), or the pairs were asked from the beginning to find a topic on which their views differed and discuss it.

When there were difficulties in conducting this exercise, examples analysed in the book recommended in the curriculum were first read in the classroom, so that the students would get an image or a model of the rhythm and the aims of the exercise.

An example of an issue that was raised and successfully developed, can be presented here indicatively. The issue was based on the students' personal experiences with the high-school subject of ancient Greek, and the question was whether the subject was a "useful" or "useless" academic course. The paraphrasing exercises led to a gradual mitigation of the binary evaluative positions around the issue, through the students' repeated efforts to focus and specify the general statements regarding the usefulness of the particular subject: what exactly do we mean by "useful" and "useless"? Is "useful" knowledge to be understood through a mostly instrumentalist perspective (understood, for instance, as professionally 'exploitable' later in life), or could it also refer to a wider linguistic development, and the cultivation of cultural sensitivity? Moreover, could these two concepts of 'usefulness' be in fact linked to one another, and how?

All of the questions above, formed a collective basis of problematization, on which the students started to build a deeper comprehension of each other's perspectives. Building on such a basis, constitutes a prerequisite for the achievement of *mutual understanding*, a principle which constitutes a key aspect of what Mezirow calls rational 'discourse', in the context of his Transformation Theory (2000, 2007, pp. 50-55). The aim of mutual understanding, also represents a key aspect of Jurgen Habermas' conceptualisation of 'discourse' (1984), a conceptualisation Mezirow draws upon, in order to elaborate his own approach (see also Mezirow 1991). It should be noted that one of the conditions posited by Habermas (1984), as necessary for the achievement of mutual understanding, refers specifically to the condition of the *comprehensibility* of the expressed viewpoints in the context of the dialogical act, and this condition was able to be actualized through the paraphrasing exercises analysed above. The effort for more careful, precise and thorough articulations, emerged as an important presupposition of the effective function of discourse.

By cultivating the intention of comprehensibility, the students were also confronted with one more important epistemic challenge, namely, that of adopting a critical stance towards the certainty of their own views. More specifically, the paraphrasing exercises allowed the students to practice what Mezirow calls 'epoché' (2000, 2007 p. 52), a term which the scholar borrows from the ancient Greek Sceptics, referring to a temporary *suspension of judgment*, effected in the context of discourse, in order to achieve a clearer understanding of the issue at hand. Characteristically, the above interrogation of the different meanings of the concept of 'usefulness', allowed the students to practise 'epoché', by refraining from rushing to a judgment about the issue, and instead enter a process of analyzing and elucidating the ambiguity of the concepts in play. By being confronted with an *interpretive ambiguity*, the students began to realize their own active role in formulating the meaning of a subject under consideration, while becoming more aware of the fact that apparent digressions, pauses, as

well as complications of meaning, can actually play a significant part in the process of dialogical interaction, as well as in the process of learning and understanding.

Once the aforementioned exercise had taken place, the students were called to present the viewpoints of their partners, first to a group of their fellow students, and then before the entire class (snowballing strategy). As I had emphasized at the start of the exercise, the purpose of this effort would be to elucidate and document the various perspectives, and *not* reach conclusions.

4. **Further Focusing the Framework of Activities: Thematizing the Understanding of 'Complexity'**

As noted above, the broader purpose of the dialogical exercises outlined here would be to mitigate the binary and conclusive treatment of an issue, in favour of familiarizing students with the breadth and depth of the process of reflective inquiry. In line with this purpose, the students were then asked to conduct group projects with the specific aim of mapping out the *complexity* of an issue, in a more systematic way. Separated into groups of 5-6, the students were first asked to apply the process just analysed, to a topic of interest. This time, however, the groups were also provided with particular conceptual tools that could assist them in delineating and framing the process more methodically.

The conceptual tools I provided them with, were drawn from:

 a. Mezirow's Theory of Transformation, where the three dimensions of the concept of critical reflection are analysed – that is, the content of a point of view, the criteria and process used for formulating the particular point of view, and, finally, the generalized assumptions, on which a given point of view is based (see premise reflection and habits of mind in Mezirow, 2000, 2007 p. 59).

 b. Certain texts in the course's curriculum that connect the content of specific criteria, to the schools of moral and political philosophy that produced them (Rachels, 2003). Indicatively, we discussed criteria drawn from Emmanuel Kant's deontological ethics (judging a practice according to certain principles), Utilitarianism (judging a practice by referring to its consequences and utility), and also Aristotle's philosophy of the virtues (judging a character, rather than an isolated action).

Both the concept of a 'criterion' and that of an 'assumption' proved to serve as productive analytical tools.

About the function of 'assumption', an example that was examined was the idea of the "sanctity" of human life, as the basis for certain opinions expressed against the practices of abortion and euthanasia. It is worth noting here, that in this case, the students referred back to the process of 'epoché' which they had utilized before, trying to determine whether one could trace an interpretive ambiguity in our understanding of what makes life 'sacred': does the idea spring from an unconditional protection of life in its biological sense, or could it also spring from an unconditional respect for the inherent value and dignity of a human being? And, if the latter is the case, could there be a possibility for the idea to be also used in favour of the right to abortion or euthanasia, since an essential aspect of human dignity refers to the right to self-determination?

By interrogating these issues, the students became more critical towards the polemical construal of the pro-life/pro-choice debate around abortion and euthanasia, realizing the need to further clarify and justify the assumptions of each position. Once more, the indeterminacy of a concept ('sanctity'), worked as an incentive which allowed learners to deepen their capacity for reasonable inquiry.

A methodologically similar approach was adopted in relation to the function of 'criterion'. The first example discussed, referred us back to the idea of 'usefulness', examined in relation to an academic subject such as ancient Greek above. The students attempted this time to understand the idea under the light of the philosophical criterion of 'utility', as this has been elaborated by the philosophical school of Utilitarianism, referring to the consequences of a particular practice. Again, the interpretation of 'utility' did not seem to be straightforward to the students: they wondered how can actually 'utility' be measured, given that not everyone agrees on what is best for everyone.

Disagreements around different types of utility were then recorded and attributed to different contexts of consideration. What the students seemed to observe was the necessity to simultaneously open up the discussion around these disagreements *and* try to work through them. I deemed this observation to be crucial, since it showed that the students were starting to integrate both an awareness of uncertainty and a need for intersubjective negotiation, in their understanding of how dialogue works.

This need for intersubjective interrogation was characteristically expressed in relation to another significant issue. Going back to the examination of how an 'assumption' works, the students were at some point confronted with the belief in the idea of 'freedom of expression', in the context of a discussion around the question of whether there are legitimate limits to this idea. The idea of 'freedom of expression' seemed to constitute another 'assumption' in need of further clarification.

Some students maintained the position that the concept of 'freedom' here, should be understood as widely as possible, given that it constitutes an individual right which has to be safeguarded against any arbitrary restrictions – for instance, safeguarding the freedom of press from any interventions by the state authority.

Another portion of students however, maintained the position that this 'freedom' should be understood in a more restricted, and conditional manner, taking into account the consideration that certain limits to this 'freedom' should be deemed legitimate, such as in cases of hate speech, where a person's cultural identity is attacked and denigrated.

Both the more 'liberal', and the more 'moderate' view, expressed above, presented an aspect of argumentative refinement, since they used the conceptual indeterminacy of 'freedom', not simply as an obstacle, but rather as a *springboard*, for a more nuanced elaboration of the problem. This nuanced elaboration of the problem, allowed the students to move away from the absolutism of agreement/disagreement, and move towards a more malleable form of collective reflection, since both views that were expressed, exhibited strong points that could be utilized on different occasions.

5. Extending the Epistemic and Ethical Dimensions of the Process

At this point, I considered it useful to anchor the process of the students' intersubjective interrogation of the issue in the idea of what Mary Field Belenky and Ann V. Stanton call 'connected knowing' (Belenky & Stanton, in Mezirow, 2000, 2007, pp. 107-136). According to Belenky and Stanton, participants in a dialogue are encouraged to highlight the strong points of each expressed view, instead of antagonistically trying to spot the weak points of a differing position. In the case just discussed, the principle of 'connected knowing' could serve as a means to trace the various interpretive and evaluative implications of what 'freedom of expression' might mean, underlining the students' willingness to fine-tune their common ground of understanding.

By working towards this direction, the principle of 'connected knowing' could enhance the student's capacity to demonstrate the complexity of a given issue, a capacity aligned with the initial aim of the discursive exercises adumbrated above. The ability to recognize and analyze

complexity amounts to an effort to articulate value (as well as evaluative assumptions) that is attentive to the possibility of further distinctions, as well as open to the possibility of further scrutiny. It is worth mentioning here that it is under this light that one could return to the vagueness of the expressions of a 'belief in science' or a 'priority of religion', referred to at the beginning of this paper to public discourse, to see how one could further specify, contextualize, and more concretely explain these expressions. For now, however, it seems important to emphasize that cultivating an awareness of complexity, could be conducive to formulating a more inclusive and crucially '*permeable*' frame of reference for the students, a term Mezirow uses (2000, 2007, p. 57), to describe a reliable structure of mental dispositions that characterizes an agent who is capable of understanding, evaluating and integrating, diversified and hitherto unfamiliar perspectives.

The purpose of cultivating the permeability of the students' frame of reference, would not be to establish a relativistic approach to the truth but to undermine competitive dogmatism, by encouraging students to seriously consider the legitimacy of differentiated perspectives. This kind of serious consideration has both an ethical and an epistemological dimension. Apart from actualizing the respect towards the voice and autonomy of any participant in a dialogue (ethical dimension), it simultaneously manages to create a more expansive and flexible framework of thinking, that allows epistemic agents to test and thoughtfully criticize the rigidity of general 'for or against' claims (epistemological dimension).

It is exactly this capacity to *probe the generality* of such claims, which amounts to what Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert describe in their paper (2021, p.12) as the capacity to develop the '*reflective power*' of judgment. According to the writers – who draw their understanding from the philosopher Emmanuel Kant (1790/1987, p. 19) – what characterizes a particular form of judgment as reflective, is the latter's capacity to 'construct new categories and patterns and form higher-order representations', able to accommodate the existence of 'outliers' that do not seem to initially fit into existing categories. Tapping into the conceptual ramifications of 'utility', 'sanctity', or 'freedom of expression' – which were analyzed above – exemplifies a way of constructing these concepts as 'higher-order representations' that can accommodate difference and variability, thus contributing to a more reflective understanding of the initial general concepts.[16]

Interrogating the plasticity of various terms and ideas, may not always come as natural to learners, since it requires the work of pushing against their impulse towards the sense that meaning can be fixed and unproblematic. This particular impulse, is especially relevant to young adults, like my Critical Thinking students, who tend to cling to the certainty of their views, also because of their need to personally express and distinguish themselves. According to psychologist Robert Kegan (in Mezirow, 2000, 2007, pp. 73-105), this tendency could have been a lingering consequence of adolescence, that is, a time during which individuals develop a characteristically egocentric psychological habit of mind.[17] Nevertheless, as Hoggan and Hoggan–Kloubert show in their paper (2021, p.13), the impulse described above, seems to also constitute a larger phenomenon, observed in the context of public discourse more generally. 'What people cannot endure is the attempt to evade the either /or', write Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944 / 2002, p. 198). Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert poignantly refer to this quote from the philosophers, to underline the

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[16] One can observe here the specific signification of the concept of 'reflective judgement' according to Kant. Psychologist Kitchener's understanding of the concept, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, seems to refer more broadly to an agent's rational capacity to account for, test and assess the validity of various perspectives (see also in Mezirow, 1991, pp. 123-128). However, both seem to capture the aspect of *testing* and *probing* particular assumptions. For the relation between Kitchener's 'reflective judgement' and philosopher John Dewey's 'reflective thinking', see Mezirow, 1991, as above.

[17] Psychologist Kitchener also refers to age (as well as education), as factors influencing learners' tendency to move towards or away from the psychological need for certainty (see in Mezirow, 1991, as above).

discomfort brought about by the effort to deviate from the imperative of definitive binary claims. However, it is precisely this discomfort that brings us back to another ethical, or rather existential aspect of this effort, an aspect which goes beyond the respect of our interlocutors, and towards the relationship with ourselves: by undermining our psychological need for certainty, being reflective, requires courage. And it requires courage, as well as deliberation, in the face of the realization that neither the truth nor the meaning of a topic under consideration, is pre-given and immediately available. Realizing this fact and acting upon this realization, may bring about a sense of risk and precariousness, which nevertheless constitute inevitable and essential components of our remaining receptive and willingly committed to the process of dialogical learning. As Mezirow notes, the elaboration of reflective judgment is probationary and tentative (2000, 2007, pp. 51-52),[18] and if we are not willing to test our way of thinking and experience, we will not be able to access the emancipatory potential rational discourse.

6. Conclusion

What I have attempted to demonstrate through the discussion in this paper, are certain strategies an adult educator can utilize, to render learners more sensitive and alert to elements of uncertainty implicated in the process of collective rational inquiry. More specifically, I have attempted to show ways that allowed my students to activate their ability to handle more intricate and multidimensional discursive processes, thus beginning to transform the restrictive stance towards the dialogical act, that they had manifested at the beginning. The gradual transformation of the students' stance towards the dialogical act, grew out of exercises revolving around efforts to 'paraphrase' (Rogers, 2012) and qualify general evaluative assertions, suspend final judgments regarding a certain issue (see the skeptical practice of 'epoché' in Mezirow, 2000, 2007), discern and unfold conceptual and evaluative possibilities (see 'complexity'), as well as elaborating forms of 'connected knowing' (Belenky & Stanton, 2007), as aspects of a more inclusive and 'permeable' way of thinking (Mezirow, 2000, 2007).

The exercises presented above seemed to significantly strengthen the students' discursive and epistemic agency by allowing them to:

a. to identify the criteria and assumptions that guide their evaluations, as well as the consequences of these criteria and assumptions,

b. to raise productive critical questions, and

c. to not shy away from the inevitable interpretive difficulties of the discursive process.

These competencies helped students formulate a common basis of mutual understanding while cultivating some important presuppositions for the formation of a conscious reflective judgment.

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[18] It is worth noting that Mezirow refers to this kind of judgement as 'critically' reflective (1991, 2000, 2007), referring to the kind of judgement that calls into question pre-established and deeply embedded generalized assumptions (habits of mind) that limit an agent's possibilities of action and understanding. By questioning the general validity of such assumptions, Mezirow's conception of critical reflection seems analogous to Kant's conception of reflective judgement. Additionally though, Mezirow's conception is specifically geared towards assessing the functionality of such assumptions in the context of Adult Learning, and in relation to an adult learner's life and experience.

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