Transformative Learning— A Closer Look at Critical Reflection with Franz Brentano

Eunice Chiu

Universität Heidelberg, Germany

yychiu.eunice@gmail.com

Abstract

Mezirow's transformative learning (TL) theory highlights the importance of critically examining frames of reference and their origins. While critical reflection is central to TL, its connection with emotions remains insufficiently addressed. This paper asserts that critical reflection encompasses rationality and emotionality, forming a unified consciousness that integrates mind and heart. By revisiting foundational psychological concepts, particularly Franz Brentano's theories of intentionality and mental phenomena, which closely connect with Mezirow's concept of critical reflection, this article offers a fresh perspective on the rational-emotional interplay. The article reviews Mezirow's TL theory, introduces Brentano's key concepts, and critiques the underrepresentation of emotionality in Mezirow's framework, emphasising its integral role in critical reflection. It explores the unity of consciousness and demonstrates how meaning-making and reflection are inherently shaped by emotional experiences. A Brentano-inspired lens clarifies the ambiguities of transformation, challenges the necessity of a disorienting dilemma, and proposes alternative pathways. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for educators and directions for future research.

Keywords

critical reflection, emotions, Franz Brentano, intentionality, transformative learning theory, unity of consciousness

1. Who is Franz Brentano?

Franz Brentano is a renowned German philosopher celebrated for his pioneering contributions to the philosophy of mind, particularly for coining the concept of intentionality. Intentionality refers to the mind's inherent capacity to direct itself toward a specific object and towards itself in critical reflection. The object of reflection is the process of thinking itself – and by the end of the article it is towards the process of feeling also, idea, or state of affairs (Brentano, 2012). As the first scholar to bridge philosophy and psychology, Brentano explored the structure and function of mental phenomena, offering a comprehensive understanding of thought, perception, experience, and emotions. Central to his work is the notion that mental phenomena are always directed toward something—this characteristic, termed intentionality, underpins every act of consciousness, linking thinking, perceiving, and imagining to an object or idea (Brentano, 2009; Kriegel, 2017). Critical reflection involves intentionality, it requires a deliberate and conscious effort to question assumptions, analyse experiences. It involves a directed mental act where individuals actively focus on their underlying assumptions, examining not just their thoughts but the meaning and purpose behind them.

Brentano's exploration of intentionality has become the bedrock in debates about the mind and the nature of reality within philosophy. In fact, intentionality has become a key concept

in debates about the mind and the nature of reality in the field of philosophy; his work also laid the groundwork for phenomenology and has had influences on many of his notable students, such as Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud, and Alexis Meinong. In this article, Brentano's theories of intentionality, mental phenomena, and emotions (Montague, 2016) are central to exploring their intersection with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, particularly in critical reflection. By integrating Brentano's insights, this discussion provides a deeper understanding of the rational-emotional dynamic in transformative learning and has significant implications for TL in areas that are increasingly needed for study. It highlights the profound role of intentionality in fostering critical reflection and meaningful change.

2. Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning (TL) theory describes how individuals critically examine their beliefs, assumptions, values, and worldviews, leading to profound shifts in perspective (Mezirow, 1978). Critical reflection is central to TL, a process that deepens an individual's awareness and understanding through thoughtful and intentional examination. TL is often initiated by a disorienting dilemma—an event or experience that disrupts existing frames of reference and challenges one's understanding of the world (Mezirow, 1991). He outlined a 10-phase framework to illustrate the stages individuals typically navigate during transformative experiences (Mezirow, 2003). These stages include: 1) encountering a disorienting dilemma, 2) engaging in self-examination accompanied by emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, or shame, 3) critically assessing assumptions, 4) recognising discontent and sharing transformative experiences socially, 5) exploring new roles, relationships, or actions, 6) developing a plan of action, 7) acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for implementation, 8) trying out new roles on a provisional basis, 9) building competence and confidence in these roles and relationships, and 10) reintegrating into one's life with a renewed perspective (Mezirow, 1991, p.168-169). This structured approach underscores the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of transformative learning. While Mezirow's 10 phases are foundational to transformative learning (TL), he emphasised that individuals need not necessarily linearly progress through these phases, reflecting the complex and dynamic nature of moving from disorientation to reintegration. In phases 1 and 2, self-examination is emphasised, and the discomfort following a disorienting dilemma is recognised. Mälkki's theory of edge emotions offers a deeper understanding of this discomfort, describing it as intense emotional states that arise when individuals confront shifts in their foundational meaning schemes—pushing them out of their comfort zones (Mälkki, 2011, 2019). These edge emotions are pivotal, as they accompany and drive profound changes in perspective and understanding within TL.

Phase 3, critical assessment of assumptions, is a cornerstone of TL, where individuals scrutinise the validity of their beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews. This phase is essential for recognising the limitations of existing frames of reference, opening pathways for growth, open-mindedness, and improved understanding (Mezirow, 1999, 2000). Phase 4, sharing discontent and engaging in transformation, is rooted in Habermas' communicative learning theory. Here, dialogue (or discourse in Habermas language) becomes a vital tool, enabling individuals to negotiate meaning, engage with diverse perspectives, and achieve shared understanding (Fleming, 2000; 2016; 2018; Habermas, 2015; Mezirow, 1999). Dialogic engagement with peers who have faced similar challenges further amplifies the potential for TL. Phase 5 marks the transition from reflection to action, exploring new roles and behaviours aligned with an individual's emerging understanding of themselves and the world (Mezirow, 1999, 2000). Phases 6 through 8 address the practical application of these new frames of reference through action planning, skill development, and the provisional trial of new roles. These phases require courage and adaptability as learners navigate the uncertainties of

change and test their ability to embrace new perspectives and behaviours. Phase 9 involves building confidence in new roles through practice and reinforcement, culminating in phase 10, where the transformation becomes fully integrated into daily life. This final phase secures lasting change in identity, behaviours, and worldviews (Fleming, 2018; Mezirow, 1999). Together, these phases provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted journey of transformative learning. Mezirow connected personal challenges to broader social issues, highlighting the interplay between individual experiences and societal contexts (Mezirow, 1978).

These phases underscore that transformative learning (TL) is a deeply personal and socially embedded process grounded in critical reflection, active engagement, and iterative trial-and-error, with positive changes unfolding over time. Not all individuals necessarily experience every phase to achieve TL, and delays or interruptions may occur. Critical reflection remains the cornerstone of TL (Fleming, 2018; Mälkki, 2011; Mezirow, 2000; Taylor & Cranton, 2021), driving the profound shifts in perspective that often follow a critical examination of beliefs. While Mezirow emphasised the role of disorienting dilemmas in triggering transformation, research has shown that TL can also emerge incrementally without a singular dramatic event. Taylor's review of TL literature (2007) highlighted that transformation may result from cumulative experiences and ongoing engagement with ideas, suggesting that TL can occur through continuous interaction, dialogue, and reflection. Cranton (2006) further demonstrated that learners often achieve transformation through sustained reflective practices and gradual exposure to new perspectives, highlighting that a single life-altering event is just one potential pathway. Dirkx's approach (1997; 2001) extends this view by focusing on TL's emotional and spiritual dimensions, emphasising how small but meaningful everyday experiences, such as moments of personal insight or artistic expression, can gradually lead to transformation. These experiences enable learners to profoundly engage with their inner selves, fostering change rooted in emotional and spiritual connections rather than one critical event. Similarly, Watkins and Marsick (2015) explored how TL can occur in daily life and workplace settings through informal, non-crisis-driven processes, emphasising the role of incidental and cumulative learning (Marsick & Yorks, 2001). The temporality of TL has also been well-explored by Alhadeff-Jones (2016), who emphasised the evolving, non-linear nature of transformative processes, allowing transformation to unfold across varied contexts and timelines. This broader understanding of TL highlights its dynamic, multifaceted pathways, extending far beyond the initial focus on disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1978).

Using Franz Brentano's framework (Brentano, 2012), the presence or absence of a disorienting dilemma may not be decisive in transformative learning. It is not the scale or traumatic nature of an event that directs an individual's intentionality toward it; instead, it is the underlying values triggered by the incident, situation, or person that cause the individual to fixate on the event or object, occupying their mental phenomenon (Brentano, 2009; Kriegel, 2017). Examining Mezirow's TL framework through Brentano's lens offers a more holistic and integrated perspective on transformative learning. This perspective underscores the conscious and active pursuit of a perspective shift—essentially the improvement or elevation of one's existing frames of reference—as the key to redirecting intentionality toward a new object. Only by achieving this shift can the mind be freed from its fixation, allowing for genuine transformation.

3. Critical Reflection & Emotionality

Mezirow's interpretation of critical reflection emphasises its rational nature, viewing it as a process through which individuals critically assess their pre-existing frames of reference, shaped by external and structural social and cultural influences. In his words, "all reflection

involves a critique, a critique of the premises or presuppositions upon which habits of expectation are predicated" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 15). This encapsulates the essence of 'critical' reflection—questioning the underlying assumptions that govern one's beliefs, actions and world views. Mezirow contrasted critical reflection with introspection, noting that while introspection involves becoming aware of one's thoughts and feelings, it does not involve critiquing the premises behind them. Critical reflection in Mezirow's framework aligns closely with the concept of "critical awareness," often likened to Paulo Freire's notion of critical consciousness (conscientização) (Freire, 1972, 1998). Both frameworks stress the importance of understanding how societal structures and power dynamics shape personal assumptions and worldviews. While Mezirow's transformative learning primarily focuses on individual shifts in perspective, he also emphasises the potential for these transformations to drive social change (Mezirow, 1999). This is central to human development and societal progress. As Mezirow articulates, "Transformation theory's focus on how we learn to negotiate and act on our purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others fosters the goal of autonomous thinking. Such autonomy is fundamental to human development and the evolution of a more just, rational, and democratic society" (Mezirow, 1999, p. 169). This vision underscores the transformative power of critical reflection in both individual growth and broader societal progress.

Although emotions do not play a central role in Mezirow's published work on transformative learning (TL) theory, he acknowledges their integral role in the transformation process. He asserts, "Emotions, as well as intellect, are involved in the transformation process because they are part of the frameworks of meaning that guide how we interpret our world" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 10). Emotions influence how individuals interpret experiences and undergo transformation. Regarding the emotional dimension of critical reflection, Mezirow notes that emotions are essential, as the process involves not only the rational examination of assumptions but also emotional and psychological changes that arise from encountering and resolving disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22).

However, Mezirow leaves the role of emotions under theorised and does not fully explore the interaction between emotions and cognition. Critical reflection remains predominantly rational in his description. This has been critiqued by scholars who argue for a more balanced integration of emotionality within the reflective process. Mälkki, for instance, introduced the concept of edge-emotions, which emerge when individuals face situations that challenge their established assumptions or worldviews (Mälkki, 2010; 2011, 2014). She posits that navigating these edge emotions effectively can help individuals transcend disequilibrium and fostering profound personal growth. Similarly, Dirkx (1997) contends that emotions are central to critical reflection in TL, suggesting that learning is deeply intertwined with emotional experiences. Cranton (2006) also highlights how feelings of discomfort and emotional resistance are inherent in the reflective process, and learners must confront these emotions in order to engage in deeper learning.

Drawing on these critiques and the ongoing debate surrounding the emotional dimension of critical reflection, this article proposes that Brentano's psychological framework (Montague, 2016) offers a valuable perspective for understanding the otherwise undertheorised and intertwined nature of emotion and cognition in TL. By framing critical reflection as a mental phenomenon, Brentano's theory suggests that critical reflection cannot be separated from emotions; they are inseparable components of our consciousness. This approach reframes the duality of critical reflection and emotions, presenting it not as an either-or process—rational or emotional—but as a unified process in which both dimensions are complementary and essential to transforming meaning. This encourages us to go beyond the need to see emotions as an add-on to critical reflection or a parallel process- it is integral.

4. Intentionality, Unity of Consciousness and Critical Reflection

Brentano's theory of intentionality posits that all mental phenomena are directed toward an object—that is, every thought, emotion, or perception is always about something beyond itself. This foundational idea has shaped philosophical and psychological discussions on consciousness, meaning-making, and cognition (Brentano, 2012). Intentionality is closely aligned with critical reflection, as both involve the intentional direction of an individual's thoughts toward examining and questioning their existing beliefs, assumptions, and interpretations of past experiences (Brentano, 2012; Marsick & Yorks, 2001). When individuals engage in critical reflection, they enter a state of self-examination, where their intentionality is consciously directed toward evaluating their existing values and presuppositions. In this sense, while Mezirow emphasises enabling subjective transformation through critical reflection, Brentano's concept of 'internality' offers a mental framework for understanding the process. It illustrates how individuals' mental phenomena are intentionally directed toward re-evaluating their frames of reference.

Critical reflection can begin with a disorienting dilemma, which, in Brentano's terms, means that the individual's intentionality is directed toward the critical incident or state of affairs, (whether the object of judgment corresponds to an external reality). This focus shapes people's thoughts, judgments, and feelings (Brentano, 2009, 2012; Montague, 2016). This connection is significant because Brentano's theory of intentionality is inherently tied to the unity of consciousness (Brentano, 2012). According to this theory, consciousness is a singular, complex phenomenon that is experienced as a whole by the individual. Mental phenomena, such as thoughts, feelings, and experiences, are part of a unified stream of consciousness, helping individuals navigate their current situations and circumstances. Unity of consciousness is an integration of thinking and feeling within consciousness as a holistic view of the mind is one that contrasts with the traditionally fragmented perspective prevalent in Western thought. Rather than treating cognition and emotion as separate domains, this approach emphasises their interdependence, recognising that conscious experience is inherently unified, with thoughts and feelings shaping and influencing one another.

An individual undergoing critical reflection may simultaneously consider several 'things', yet one mental phenomenon—critical reflection—dominates their consciousness until new frames of reference are developed. At this point, the individual can move on to the next mental phenomenon in the unified stream of consciousness (Taylor, 2007). This concept of the unity of consciousness provides a third way to understand critical reflection: it is not a matter of rationality versus emotionality. Instead, both can co-occur and are integral to the reflective process. They are not separate or opposing forces but complementary components of a unified, holistic experience within the individual's stream of consciousness. One might argue, as Carol Gilligan does, that the separation of thought from emotion is a trauma in its own way (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2022; Gilligan, 1993, 2014). According to Gilligan, this fragmentation reflects a deeper societal tendency to devalue emotions, particularly in contexts that emphasize rationality, logic, and objectivity. In this sense, the bifurcation between thought and emotion is not merely a theoretical distinction but a harmful cultural construct that restricts authentic self-expression and emotional well-being, ultimately contributing to a sense of disconnection within individuals.

5. Meaning-Making as a Mental Phenomenon

Mental phenomena are inherently subjective (Brentano, 2012), shaped by an individual's perceptions and influenced by their sociocultural background and previous experiences. Viewing transformative learning (TL) through the lens of mental phenomena allows us to

understand meaning-making as an active process of engaging with and altering cognitive phenomena. In this context, transformation signifies a shift in an individual's consciousness orientation. Meaning making, therefore, is the process through which individuals reflect on and reinterpret their experiences, ultimately leading to a shift in perspective or worldview. The ability to change is central to TL (Mezirow, 1991).

Meaning-making can be broken down into five essential elements of TL: critical reflection, rational discourse, perspective transformation, action, and emotional involvement (Mezirow, 1997). These elements encompass the process of critical reflection, engagement in dialogue, acquisition of new perspectives, actions taken to integrate these perspectives, and the emotional dimensions of learning, which are often tied to one's identity (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000). Through this process, individuals undergo profound, structural changes that reshape their perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours, leading to the development of new values that help them redefine their roles and actions in the world. This transformation includes both intellectual and emotional shifts (Taylor, 2007; Marsick & Watkins, 2015).

When we view this process as an individual's central mental phenomenon, it implies that individuals ultimately experience perspective transformation, allowing them to transition to the next mental phenomenon. Like frames of reference, mental phenomena are not static; each can be altered through active engagement in internal examination and reflection.

6. The Ambiguity of Transformation

Mezirow's 10 phases of transformative learning (TL) (Mezirow, 1991) have been widely critiqued, particularly for their linear structure, which does not always align with the complex and non-linear experiences/nature of transformation. While the phases provide a valuable preliminary framework for understanding the abstract concept of transformation, they are not intended to be universally applied to every individual. The intricacies of each person's transformative journey make it impossible to reduce transformation to a rigid sequence. The real value of these phases lies in their ability to shed light on how transformation occurs at both the psychological and behavioural levels.

From a Brentano-inspired perspective, transformation can be viewed as the phenomenology of personal change, where altering one's experience structures (the acquisition of new frames of reference) is only possible through critical examination and reflection. Learners' frames of reference are influenced by various factors, including social structures, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, emotional navigation, and past experiences (Fleming, 2016, 2018). These factors contribute to the unity of consciousness, which is central to Brentano's framework (Marchesi, 2021). A disorienting dilemma can trigger edge emotions, where the discomfort experienced compels individuals to focus their mental phenomena on the incident, initiating the active process of meaning-making and critical reflection.

Critical awareness and reflection remain central mental phenomena, guiding the transformation process. Ultimately, perspective changes occur as new frames of reference are acquired, directing the individual's mental phenomena toward new avenues of thought and action (Brentano, 2009; Marsick & Yorks, 2001). This approach emphasises the fluid, dynamic, and deeply personal nature of transformative learning, where critical reflection serves as both a catalyst and a continuous process of meaning-making. But this expression or articulation of the process, though accurate, is only partial, leaving effect on the side-line of the TL process.

7. Emotions, Mental Phenomena & Transformative Learning

Mezirow's transformative learning (TL) theory underemphasises the role of emotions, particularly in process of critical reflection. While not explicitly focused on emotions, Brentano's philosophical framework provides insights into their significance by framing them as indispensable mental phenomena. According to Brentano, emotions are not merely physiological or neurological responses but are integral parts of our consciousness. They reflect the intentionality of the mind—its directedness toward an object, situation, or person (Antonelli, 2021; Brentano, 2009). This concept situates emotions within the larger context of how individuals interpret and react to their experiences. Emotions are integrated in the hermeneutic drive for understanding.

Brentano's theory of emotions is based on three central claims:

1. *Emotions as sui generis intentional phenomena: Emotions inherently possess intentionality; they are always about something*
2. *Emotions as evaluative phenomena: They involve value judgments, enabling individuals to assess situations or objects as good, bad, just, or unjust*
3. *Emotions as the basis of an epistemology of objective value: Emotions help individuals perceive and evaluate values in their environment, thereby influencing their understanding and behaviour* (Montague, 2016).

How can the inter-relationship between thought and emotion be explained? Consider a student who is about to present a project in front of the class. The student's thoughts might include beliefs like, "I might mess up" or "Everyone will judge me." These thoughts generate emotions such as anxiety, nervousness, or fear. The emotional response can then further influence the student's thoughts, making them more self-critical or increasing their focus on potential failure. This feedback loop could lead to a decrease in the student's performance due to heightened anxiety and a lack of focus. In Brentano's work, these emotions, termed "feelings", are part of the individual's affective consciousness—a state where emotions and value judgments are entangled (Kriegel, 2021). Affective consciousness is significant because it shapes how individuals experience and respond to the world. Emotions influence behaviours and leave traces in – or even define - an individual's frames of reference. For instance, the anxiety experienced from the student might cause the student to stutter and speak unconfidently, leading to association with embarrassment whenever s/he needs to speak in public. Over time, this response becomes a part of the individual's frame of reference. If a different outcome occurs, such as instead of being laughed at by peers, s/he gets encouraged and praised for his/her courage, it might provoke feelings of hope and curiosity. These lingering emotions can lead to prolonged reflection, forming a new mental phenomenon, potentially becoming the key for the student to overcome his/her fear of public speaking.

The cyclical interaction between emotions, judgments, and experiences ensures that emotions play a foundational role in shaping and reshaping frames of reference. For example, an individual's repeated emotional reactions to a specific situation and differing outcomes can lead to shifts in perspective over time. This aligns with the transformative process, where the disorienting dilemmas central to Mezirow's theory provoke emotional responses that, when reflected upon, catalyse meaningful change. Brentano's perspective highlights the inseparability of emotional and cognitive processes. Emotions are not ancillary but integral to the reflective processes underlying TL. By framing emotions as evaluative and intentional, Brentano's work enriches our understanding of their role in TL, offering a more holistic perspective on critical reflection that integrates rationality and emotionality. Emotions are fundamental to mental phenomena, shaping individuals' consciousness and guiding learners toward more profound self-examination, ultimately fostering a more thorough and integrated

critical awareness. In this sense, emotions actively contribute to how one thinks, interprets situations and engages with experiences. They are not passive responses but active engagements, emerging from the interplay of rationality (thought) and emotionality (feelings). Emotions play a pivotal role by influencing both the content and direction of an individual's mental phenomena and intentionality, particularly in moments of disruption, such as after a disorienting dilemma.

Kaisu Mälkki's concept of **edge emotions** emphasises the micro-traumas of daily life—minor disruptions that challenge an individual's meaning perspectives. These "everyday threats to the functions of our meaning perspectives" can become learning opportunities if navigated effectively (Mälkki, 2011, p. 62). Edge-emotions, as recurring aspects of everyday life are part of an individual's consciousness and serve as tools for navigating their perspectives and values. Drawing from Brentano's theory of emotions, these edge-emotions signify a dynamic interaction between perception, judgment, and emotional response. They are indicators of where one's consciousness is directed and provide the momentum for reflection and meaning-making. Edge-emotions, arising from the tension between existing perspectives and challenging experiences, compel individuals to confront their assumptions. As Mälkki (2011, 2019) and Marsick and Yorks (2001) suggest, deeper emotional engagement increases the likelihood of perspective transformation. Feelings of discomfort triggered by edge-emotions force individuals to reflect on the triggering event or state of affairs. This reflective process makes critical examination of one's frames of reference possible, facilitating new insights and eventual transformation. When edge-emotions are understood through a Brentano-inspired lens, they become integral to mental phenomena and intentionality. Brentano's framework posits that emotions arise from perceptions and judgments, embodying the intentional nature of consciousness. In this view, edge-emotions represent a focused form of affective consciousness. They emerge when an individual's meaning perspectives are questioned (Brentano, 2012; Mälkki, 2019). These emotions direct intentionality toward the triggering event, forming a central mental phenomenon encompassing thoughts, feelings, and judgements.

Discomfort associated with edge emotions catalyses critical reflection. It forces individuals to revisit the events that triggered the emotion, analyze its implications, and re-evaluate their assumptions and values. Over time, this process may lead to perspective transformation, whereby individuals adopt new meaning perspectives that align better with their revised understanding of the world. By integrating Mälkki's edge-emotion theory with Brentano's philosophy of emotions, a nuanced understanding of the role of emotions in transformative learning emerges. Edge-emotions are not merely reactions but active participants in shaping mental phenomena and directing intentionality. They act as both triggers and guides in the reflective process, bridging the gap between rationality and emotionality. This perspective underscores the inseparable relationship between emotions and critical reflection, emphasising their collective role in fostering a more inclusive TL.

8. Grasping TL without a Disorienting Dilemma with Mental Phenomena

In Mezirow's TL (1978) a disorienting dilemma is proposed as a catalyst for critical reflection; however, scholars such as Kaisu Mälkki, Edward Taylor (2002), Chad Hoggan, and Patricia Cranton (2014) etc., have demonstrated in their work that TL can occur without a disorienting dilemma. Mälkki introduced incremental learning through reflection, emphasising the importance of everyday reflective moments that occur at a smaller scale rather than disruptive and traumatic crises (Mezirow, 1978). Transformation can be reached through regular and routine reflective practices that temporally challenge learners' assumptions (Mälkki & Green, 2016). Using Brentano's framework, as mental phenomena have no time

limit, this type of incremental learning would mean that those events and moments occupy an individual's mental phenomena. Still, the shift of intentionality gradually occurs as new frames are formulated in that person's mind (Mezirow, 1991).

On the other hand, Taylor et al., (2012) discussed the dialogic aspect of TL, in which social interaction and collaborative learning are believed to be vital to fostering gradual shifts in one's perspectives. It is noteworthy that although Mezirow's TL does not discuss the dialogic aspect, his theory does not reject the idea. In Brentano's framework, mental phenomena are individual and inward (Brentano, 2012); communication of one's mental phenomena is possible, but according to him, examining others' mental phenomena is not (Mezirow, 1991). Therefore, communicating one's internationality requires the individual to identify where his/her mental phenomenon is directed, and the process requires reflective and reflexive thinking. Engaging in dialogues based on such reflections might alter the person's perspective, achieving TL and, once again, proving that TL can occur without a disorienting dilemma [see: (Fleming, 2000). Even Her Nudes Were Lovely: Toward Connected Self-reliance at the Irish Museum of Modern Art: A Research report on the Museum's Programme for Older Adults. Irish Museum of Modern Art ISBN: 1-873654-85-5] Hoggan and Cranton (2014) found that fiction, metaphors, and symbolic narratives in education can evoke emotions and critical reflection, leading to transformative learning (TL), which moves beyond Mezirow's focus on disorienting dilemmas. Using Brentano's framework, emotions are mental phenomena tied to thoughts and judgments. They connect with specific ideas, shaping an individual's affective consciousness and intentionality. This aligns with Hoggan and Cranton's findings, showing that emotions, triggered by classroom materials, can foster critical reflection and transformation.

9. Critical Reflection Intersects with Brentano's Intentionality

Critical reflection is a fundamental component of transformative learning (TL), involving a deep introspection into one's beliefs, assumptions, and values. It allows learners to identify and challenge existing biases by questioning the validity of their perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). Through reflectivity and reflexivity, individuals can shift from habitual thinking to a more flexible and informed mindset (Mezirow, 1978). Reflectivity is critically examining personal thoughts, actions, and experiences, fostering a more profound understanding to improve future behaviours. Reflexivity, on the other hand, extends beyond the individual to encompass an ongoing awareness of how one's beliefs, values, and actions are both shaped by and influence broader social, cultural, and structural contexts. Reflexivity incorporates an analysis of power dynamics and social structures, offering a relational and systemic perspective (Schön, 1983). Critical reflection goes beyond deep reflective thinking, as it evaluates the structural factors underlying an individual's beliefs (Mezirow, 2012). It identifies the boundaries that shape these beliefs, fostering critical awareness that ideally leads to emancipation from original constraints. This process enables reconstructing perspectives that align with more inclusive and comprehensive understandings (Mezirow, 1991). However, critical reflection is inherently emotional, as it often evokes a range of feelings, including discomfort, curiosity, hope, and motivation (Marsick & Yorks, 2001; Mälkki, 2012, 2019; Taylor, 2007). These emotions play a crucial role in the reflective process, shaping its outcomes and fostering qualities such as empathy, resilience, and personal growth.

Growth is a concept central to John Dewey's philosophy, which occurs when reflection enables individuals to connect past experiences with new insights, equipping them to respond to future challenges more effectively (1933). Dewey's notion of growth transcends the mere accumulation of knowledge, emphasising the ability to think critically and apply knowledge meaningfully. Another key element of TL, influenced by Dewey, is the continuity of experience. Each experience builds upon previous ones, shaping future understanding and

development. This concept highlights the importance of interaction and active engagement with the environment and others in co-constructing knowledge (Dewey, 1933). Together, critical reflection and the continuity of experiences underscore the transformative potential of learning as a deeply emotional, relational, and growth-oriented process.

Mezirow's theory identifies three types of reflection integral to transformative learning (TL): content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. Content reflection involves examining the facts and immediate details of an experience (what); process reflection focuses on the methods and strategies used to understand the experience (how), and premise reflection critically questions the underlying beliefs about the experience. Premise reflection is the most transformative, challenging fundamental worldviews and perceptions. Critical reflection, therefore, enables individuals to process experiences beyond surface-level learning, leading to profound shifts in their frames of reference. Scholars like Brookfield (2017) emphasise critical reflection as a skill that uncovers hidden assumptions, deepens understanding, and enhances the likelihood of TL. Cranton (2006) highlights that the depth of reflection correlates with the magnitude of perspective changes, while Taylor's meta-analyses (2007) confirm the importance of reflection depth as a key indicator of TL. Critical reflection can also be understood through a Brentanian lens as a mental act in which intentionality and reflexive critical awareness create the potential for transformation. Brentano's theory of intentionality posits that mental acts, including thinking, believing, feeling, and judging, are always directed toward an object, embodying a sense of "aboutness" (Brentano, 2009, 2012). When engaging in critical reflection, individuals direct their thoughts toward self-examination and the repeated consideration of the incident or state of affairs. This intentional focus forms a mental phenomenon.

According to Brentano, mental acts involve implicit self-awareness, which aligns with Mezirow's emphasis on critical awareness in TL. Both theories recognise the importance of examining pre-existing beliefs, values, and assumptions. In critical reflection, the mind deliberately interrogates internal thoughts, content, and cognitive-emotional responses to experiences. Brentano's concept of judgment, which involves the evaluation of the validity of assumptions, resonates with Mezirow's description of uncovering the boundaries and limitations of one's frames of reference. This evaluative process is crucial for enabling transformation. Brentano's perspective enriches our understanding of critical reflection by integrating the relational and complementary roles of emotionality and rationality. By framing critical reflection as a mental phenomenon, the focus shifts from the duality of rational and emotional responses to their interconnected nature, illustrating how both contribute to the transformative process. This integral view offers a deeper appreciation of critical reflection as the foundation for personal and cognitive transformation.

10. Applications in the Classroom

Critical reflection plays a pivotal role in deconstructing power dynamics within the classroom and extending this critical awareness to broader societal contexts. This process benefits both teachers and students, who, in this setting, are considered co-learners. By fostering a heightened sense of critical awareness, classroom experiences become more meaningful, prompting positive changes and improved frames of reference. Classrooms are inherently emotionally rich environments, with constant emotional exchanges among students (emotional transactions) and between teachers and students (emotional contagion) (Pekrun, 2006, 2012). A Brentano-inspired framework of transformative learning (TL) encourages teachers and students to understand diverse perspectives while embracing inclusivity and diversity. This approach has become increasingly significant in today's classrooms, characterised by students of varying abilities and cultural backgrounds. Through transcending

and expanding their frames of reference, teachers and students cultivate open-mindedness and empathy, two essential qualities in contemporary educational settings. Compassion and empathy are vital to fostering a harmonious classroom environment and addressing the complexities of our interconnected world.

Moreover, this framework encourages learners to apply insights gained from TL to address complex problems. Pedagogical strategies such as problem-based learning and flexible grouping can nurture the mindset needed for TL by encouraging collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptability (Mezirow, 1978). As students develop a robust sense of critical awareness, they grow into adults capable of tackling multifaceted real-world challenges. Ultimately, this fosters societal betterment by creating a more just, rational, and democratic society. To apply this Brentano-inspired perspective on transformative learning, educators can take several practical steps to integrate the theory of mental phenomena into their teaching practices. For instance, fostering an environment where critical reflection is encouraged is essential. Teachers can design activities that prompt learners to engage in deep self-examination, such as reflective journals, group discussions, or case study analyses, to question underlying beliefs and assumptions.

Moreover, by focusing on the interplay between emotions and cognition, educators can create spaces where learners are invited to explore how their emotional responses shape their cognitive processes. For example, when students encounter a disorienting dilemma or a challenge in their learning, teachers can guide them to reflect on the emotional reactions these situations evoke—such as frustration or confusion—and how these emotions might inform their deeper understanding or reshape their perspectives. Additionally, by embracing a more inclusive, context-sensitive approach to TL, teachers can acknowledge the diverse sociocultural backgrounds of their learners and create learning activities that reflect these varied experiences, making the transformation process more relevant and personalised. Educators can encourage students to share and analyse their personal stories by incorporating narrative analysis into the curriculum, helping them make sense of their transformative experiences. Ultimately, this approach emphasises a holistic view of learning, where the mental, emotional, and social dimensions of the learners' transformation are recognised as interconnected and vital for growth.

11. Research Implications

Brentano's psychological theory, which serves as a foundation for phenomenology, underscores the importance of exploring subjective experiences. As an inherently individual and subjective process, transformative learning has long been critiqued for needing a more inclusive, holistic, and context-sensitive framework (Fleming, 2016, 2018; Taylor, 2007). Scholars have increasingly highlighted the necessity of addressing aspects such as the emotional dimension (Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 1997, 2001; Marsick & Watkins, 2015; Marsick & Yorks, 2001), sociocultural influences (Fleming, 2013, 2022), and power dynamics (Brookfield, 2005; Marsick & Watkins, 2015). When meaning-making is viewed as the central mental phenomenon, a Brentano-inspired perspective addresses the ambiguity surrounding transformation by emphasising its nuanced and deeply personal nature. This perspective encourages researchers to adopt phenomenological approaches to explore individuals' transformative journeys. Narrative analysis, which focuses on understanding how people construct meaning through their stories, deserves more attention as it aligns closely with the core intentions of transformative learning (Bruner, 1991; Polkinghorne, 2010). Through this lens, transformative learning can be situated within a broader discourse that emphasises the intricate interplay between cognition, emotion, and sociocultural contexts.

Linking Mezirow's theory of transformative learning to Brentano's philosophy allows for a deeper conceptualisation of critical reflection as a central mental phenomenon. This connection integrates cognitive and philosophical dimensions, situating transformative learning within a more comprehensive framework. Moreover, this approach addresses critiques of transformative learning's limited engagement with emotions by presenting mental phenomena as inherently tied to complex emotional processes. By recognising the intertwined nature of emotion and cognition, this perspective offers an enriched understanding of transformation at both emotional and behavioural levels. Critical reflection, the cornerstone of transformative learning, is reconceptualised through a Brentano-inspired lens as a process deeply rooted in emotions and rationality. The journey from edge-emotions and discomfort to the self-examination of existing values reveals that reflection is not purely cognitive but also profoundly shaped by affective dimensions.

References

Alhadeff-Jones, M. (2016). *Time and the rhythms of emancipatory education*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315727899

Antonelli, M. (2021). Consciousness and intentionality in Franz Brentano. *Acta Analytica*, *37*(3), 301–322. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-021-00480-2

Brentano, F. (2009). *The True and the Evident (Routledge revivals)*. Routledge.

Brentano, F. (2012). *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. Routledge.

Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical Theory for adult learning and teaching*. Open University Press.

Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. John Wiley & Sons.

Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, *18*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1086/448619

Cranston, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*. Jossey-Bass.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*. Houghton Mifflin.

Dirkx, J. M. (1997). Nurturing soul in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *74*, 79–88. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7409

Dirkx, J. M. (2001). The power of Feelings: emotion, imagination, and the construction of meaning in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *89*, 63–72. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.9

Erhard, C. (2024). The Threefold Essence of Consciousness: Brentano versus Pfänder. *European Journal of Philosophy*. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.13011

Eschenbacher, S., & Fleming, T. (2022). Towards a Pedagogy of Trauma: experiences of paramedics and firefighters in a COVID-19 era and opportunities for transformative learning. *Education Sciences*, *12*(10), 655. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12100655

Esbern, F.-H., Duveskog, D., & Taylor, E. W. (2013). Less noise in the household: The impact of farmer field schools on gender relations. *Journal of Research in Peace, Gender and Development*, *2*(2), 44–55.

Fleming, T. (2016). *Toward a Living Theory of Transformative Learning: Beyond Mezirow and Habermas to Honneth* [Lecture]. 1st Mezirow Memorial Lecture, United States of America.

Fleming, T. (2000). Habermas on Civil Society, Lifeworld and System: Unearthing the Social in Transformation Theory. *Teachers College Record the Voice of Scholarship in Education*, 0. http://eprints.maynoothuniversity.ie/1058/1/HabermasTFleming.pdf

Fleming, T. (2016). Reclaiming the emancipatory potential of adult education: Honneth's critical theory and the struggle for recognition. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, *7*(1), 13–24. https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela9077

Fleming, T. (2018a). Critical theory and transformative learning. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology*, *9*(3), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijavet.2018070101

Fleming, T. (2018b). Critical Theory and Transformative learning: Rethinking the radical intent of Mezirow's theory. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology (IJAVET)*, *9*(3), 1–13.

Fleming, T. (2022). Transformative Learning and Critical Theory: Making Connections with Habermas, Honneth, and Negt. In *Springer eBooks* (pp. 25–43). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84694-7_2

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum

Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press.

Gilligan, C. (2014). Moral Injury and the Ethic of Care: Reframing the Conversation about Differences. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, *45*(1), 89–106. https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12050

Habermas, J. (2015). *The theory of communicative action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society, Volume 1*. John Wiley & Sons.

Hoggan, C., & Cranton, P. (2014). Promoting transformative learning through reading fiction. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *13*(1), 6–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614561864

Kriegel, U. (2017). *The Routledge Handbook of Franz Brentano and the Brentano School*. Routledge.

Kriegel, U. (2021). Brentano on consciousness, intentionality, value, will, and emotion: Reply to symposiasts. *European Journal of Philosophy*, *31*(2), 486–493. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12693

Mälkki, K. (2010). Building on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning: theorising the challenges to reflection. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *8*(1), 42–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344611403315

Mälkki, K. (2011). Rethinking disorienting dilemmas within Real-Life crises. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *62*(3), 207–229. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713611402047

Mälkki, K. (2019). Coming to Grips with Edge-Emotions: The Gateway to Critical Reflection and Transformative Learning. In *Springer eBooks* (pp. 59–73). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19159-7_5

Mälkki, K., & Green, L. (2014). Navigational Aids. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *12*(1), 5–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614541171

Mälkki, K., & Green, L. (2016). Ground, warmth, and light facilitate reflection and transformative dialogue. *Journal of Educational Issues*, *2*(2), 169. https://doi.org/10.5296/jei.v2i2.9947

Marchesi, A. (2021). A systematic reconstruction of Brentano's theory of consciousness. *Topoi*, *41*(1), 123–132. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-020-09737-8

Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. (2015). *Informal and Incidental Learning in the Workplace (Routledge Revivals)*. Routledge.

Marsick, V., & Yorks, L. (2001). Learning and the role of emotions in creating meaning. In *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *89*, pp. 25–34.

Mezirow, J. (1978a). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, *28*(2), 100–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202

Mezirow, J. (1978b). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, *28*(2), 100–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative Learning: theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *74*, 5–12. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative Learning as Discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *1*(1), 58–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603252172

Mezirow, J. (2012). Learning to think like an adult. Core Concepts of Transformation Theory. In *The Handbook of Transformative Learning* (pp. 73–95).

Montague, M. (2016). A contemporary view of Brentano's theory of emotion. *The Monist*, *100*(1), 64–87. https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onw019

Pekrun, R. (2006). The Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions: Assumptions, corollaries, and implications for educational research and practice. *Educational Psychology Review*, *18*(4), 315–341. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-006-9029-9

Pekrun, R., & Linnenbrink-Garcia, L. (2012). Academic emotions and student engagement. In *Springer eBooks* (pp. 259–282). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_12

Polkinghorne, D. E. (2010). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. State University of New York Press.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Routledge.

Taylor, E. W. (2007). An update of transformative learning theory: a critical review of the empirical research (1999–2005). *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *26*(2), 173–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370701219475

Taylor, E. W., & Cranton, P. (2012). *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*. John Wiley & Sons.