

# ADULT EDUCATION

Critical  

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## **ADULT EDUCATION: Critical Issues**

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Χρήστος Γούλας

## Transformative Learning Future Orientations Study: An overview

**Katerina Kedraka<sup>a</sup>, Thanassis Karalis<sup>b</sup>, Natassa Raikou<sup>c</sup>**

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### Introduction: A Journal in progress for a Theory in progress

Following the end of the pandemic we had the idea for a survey among distinguished scholars and active researchers of the field of Transformative Learning (TL) concerning the impact, resilience, future perspectives and possible (re)orientations of a living and always evolving theory, that of TL. Our journal, was “born” during the pandemic as both the initial concept and the first issues coincided with this hardship for humanity, which at the same time made us question inter alia the possibility of our theoretical tools to interpret new modes and trends that emerged during the pandemic period. TL is now in its fifth decade, but it is still a theory in progress as the theoretical pursuits of many researchers are characterized both by a tendency to expand into new fields, but at the same time by a remarkable deepening of its basic concepts, i.e. the roots of Mezirow's original ideas. Considering therefore our journal as a continuously evolving endeavor, which constantly (has to) turn towards new trends in critical issues of adult education theory, we thought of organizing a survey on the perspectives of TL.

As we mentioned in the call<sup>1</sup>, our initiative was addressed to the members of ITLA community who have an institutional role within it: the ITLA's Mission Circle and Leadership Circle, the editors of the *Journal of Transformative Education*, the reviewers of *Jack Mezirow Living Theory of Transformative Learning Award* and *Patricia Cranton Distinguished Transformative Learning Dissertation Award*, the Conveners of the ESREA's *Transformative & Emancipatory Adult Education* network, and the representatives of the organizations affiliated with ITLA, the Italian Transformative Learning Network, and the Hellenic Adult Education Association.

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<sup>1</sup> For the Call, see Annex

First of all, we feel the need to thank those who responded to the journal's challenge and gave their views in order to make this feature possible. In trying to summarize the views submitted and to formulate a short preface we have seen how much the experiences and contexts from which the authors come, influence their views and, more importantly, their perspective on the evolution of TL. The background, cultural identity, and origins of most writers are more than evident in their quests and responses. For example, Khupe and Nyamupangedengu clearly stated that "both our present understanding (and interpretation) of, and our re-imagining of the potential that the theory holds, are informed by our identity as African women".

Since in the call we had specified six major areas of concern in the form of questions, the same structure will be kept in this article, trying to make a brief reference to the trends identified and even using in several cases the contributors' reports in their entirety. We note that the articles of this current issue are published in alphabetical order.

### **What are the elements that constitute the identity of the theoretical field of Transformative Learning?**

Some authors highlight the theoretical roots, the approaches of theorists that formed the foundation of Mezirow's theory (such as the ideas of Dewey, Habermas, Kuhn, Freire and others), while in other cases the emphasis is on the basic concepts that make up the process of transformation (such as perspective transformation, critical reflection, dialogue). Fleming, Misawa, Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert distinguish the concept of experience as central to TL. Some emphasize its social dimension (Khupe & Nyamupangedengu, Misawa, Fabbri), while others emphasize its physical dimension (Koulaouzides et al., Eschenbacher, Romano, & Soeiro). However, some scholars give a holistic view of the transformation process including all levels: cognitive, affective, psychic, somatic, and imaginative (Kokkos, Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert). Finally, some point to the distinction of TL from other types of learning as affecting the way we perceive, feel, interact, and experience the world around us (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert).

### **What supports and what hinders the formation and development of this field?**

As supporting elements to the development of the scope of TL, at the societal level, scholars refer to the enlightened social movements (neoliberal capitalism, reductionism, the related mantra of lifelong learning, embracing diversity) and the emancipatory supportive educational settings (Fleming, Kokkos, Khupe & Nyamupangedengu, Misawa). Within the framework of TL theory, important reinforcing factors are the ever-increasing enrichment by new perspectives (Kokkos, Koulaouzides et al., Misawa), as well as the access to a community, social networking and relationship-building -TL conferences, associations, networks, etc (Misawa, Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert).

On the other hand, the elements that scholars claim that hinder the development of the field's identity, are much more than those that support it. This may be due to their interest, commitment and anxiety to develop the field by managing any difficulties. That is, it seems that field scholars are significantly concerned about the obstacles to the development of the TL, and through identifying the causes they attempt to explore actions, strategies, and theoretical and practical approaches towards supporting and strengthening the field.

Potential hindrances to the development of the field within the framework of TL theory are mentioned the abundance of emerging heterogeneous conceptualizations and a lack of synthesis and critical engagement with theory (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, Kokkos, Koulaouzides et al.). On the other hand, Koulaouzides et al. are sceptical about getting stuck in the original theory without exploring its contribution to current social emergencies.

### **How do you understand the concept of "living theory of TL"?**

There is also a variation in the way we understand the concept of "living theory of TL". Having in mind that Mezirow labeled his work as a "theory in progress", most of the scholars conceive it as a development, an evolution, a lifelong process. It's about the review of its own components, while remaining open to the incorporation of meaningful elements drawn from other theoretical perspectives or research findings, both theoretical and practical (Fleming, Kokkos, Misawa). It's about the process of

transformation to respond to the contextual challenges of the social reality (Koulaouzides et al.), while its elements can be embodied in our actions, behaviors, and experiences (Khupe & Nyamupangedengu). As Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert mention, "The 'transformative learner' is on a quest for better perspectives, and the theorization about those learning processes is in a constant search for improvement".

### **How do you perceive the "deep change" that Transformative Learning can bring about?**

Some scholars find Hoggan's contribution on how we perceive the 'deep change' influential in understanding the process of TL (Khupe & Nyamupangedengu, Kokkos). It's about a process of 'unlearning' (Misawa), with holistic life changes on how the person conceptualizes, experiences and interacts. This involves change at the core of one's identity (Kokkos), but also potential social transformation as well (Fleming). There are day-to-day changes, but also dramatic, revolutionary and radical changes in the world view of learners (Fleming). It is an experience of uncertainty, while there are always different possible outcomes that can be explored (Koulaouzides et al., Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert). Hoggan-Kloubert and Hoggan underline that there are different types of change, but a person will not necessarily change in all ways in every instance of transformation.

### **What would you propose to enhance the progress of living theory of TL?**

Contributors make several suggestions on enhancing the progress of living theory of TL, giving emphasis on dialogue within TL community and taking into account other perspectives, theories and disciplines. Fleming, for example, argues that critical theory (Habermas, Honneth, Negt among others) can help reconnect individual and society in our TL thinking, giving emphasis on sociological imagination. Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert suggest a synthesis of already existing diverse perspectives and ideas, without neglecting the civic-minded emphasis that Mezirow had. They also mentioned the importance of dialogue and collaboration, as well as ethical issues of TL. Kokkos refers to a metatheoretical work and an in-depth discourse that should take place within the TL community. Koulaouzides et al. find an interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-fertilization with new perspectives in adult learning necessary in the progress of



TL. Khupe and Nyamupangedengu suggest applying TL theory earlier than adulthood in order for adults to be better prepared, while taking into account the context, the relationship and the role of language, as emerging elements that need special attention in the TL process. Misawa underlines the importance of a clear understanding of the identity and the applicability of the theory, while practicing self-reflection in educational contexts, as well as developing a supportive learning community and network that embraces diverse perspectives.

**What is the position of Mezirow's "Transformation Theory", as well as other theoretical perspectives, within this process?**

Fleming states that TL has clearly expanded and been re-interpreted while important and original re-makes include work that outlines the role of disorienting dilemmas and edge emotions; integrates Heron's theory of personhood; connects Jung and soul work. For Khupe and Nyamupangedengu Mezirow's Transformation Theory is the footing from which we can apply transformation to different fields (including teaching, assessment, research), for them the theory acts as the language and the lens which we use to describe and explain the process of transformation.

Misawa points out that the individual moves from an unexamined way of thinking to a more examined and critically reflective way, also individuals can go through a significant shift in their perspectives, beliefs and ways of thinking.

Koulaouzides et al. turn their analysis towards Mezirow's own conception of the theory introduced as a theory in progress. Thus, they propose to radically question the core assumptions of transformation theory itself, to keep it as a theory in progress., perhaps turning to a philosophical approach that considers both the public and the private spheres.

Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert argue that the field benefits from embracing a plurality since Mezirow did not cover the entirety of the theoretical field of TL. Mezirow's theory is appropriate for many learning contexts but should not be considered as the only way of conceiving transformative learning

For Kokkos, TL as introduced by Jack Mezirow is the initial conceptualization of TL and the most frequent reference point in TL literature. Therefore, Mezirow's

*Transformation Theory* should be seen as one of the main sources of the TL metatheoretical work.

### **Concluding**

After carefully reading and analyzing the contributors' articles, we argue that the distinguished contributors to this small scale survey highlight TL as an open, useful, critical and modern theory on perceiving transformation in learning and living, which could be further enriched by a meta-reflection on social aspects that form and/or interfere with transformation within educational contexts. We believe that our initial idea led to a high-quality result, but also opened up paths for productive contributions later on. Having once again thanked those who responded to our call for the survey, we would like to encourage all of us, the readers of the journal, to continue this dialogue. So let this feature be seen *inter alia* as the start of a dialogue in progress. Our journal *Adult Education - Critical Issues* will support this attempt.

## **Transformative Learning in the Era of Post-Reflexivity**

**Loretta Fabbri<sup>a</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article collects over 20 years of studies, encounters, and conversations around Transformative Theory and reflective practices, which have characterized my identity as a scholar and the Italian Transformative Learning Network's identity. I am going to trace the main challenges that, starting from practice-based studies and situated learning theory, have established the foundation for our research group's discussion on Transformative Learning. I am going to venture into open dialectical arenas with new perspectives that have amazed and questioned me. The posthuman, sociomateriality, and post-qualitative inquiry interrogate some of the foundations of Transformative Theory and urge us to create a creative space to share challenging epistemic constructions.

### **Key words**

Transformative learning, reflective practice, situated learning, posthuman onto-epistemology, post-qualitative inquiry

### **Introduction**

My name is Loretta Fabbri, I belong to that community of qualitative researchers who interact with post-qualitative inquiry, I am an adult education scholar, I belong to the conceptual family of Transformative Learning Theory. I teach at the University of Siena, and I am among the founders of the Italian Transformative Learning Network, a research community that gathers more than 90 researchers from Higher Education institutions or social and organizational contexts and recognizes in the Transformative Learning Theory a shared theoretical and methodological framework. In thinking about the writing of this paper, I have taken my cues from other colleagues (Elizabeth

Adams St. Pierre, Judith Butler, and others): I state that my use of the “I” in the text "replay and resignify the theoretical positions that have constituted me" (Butler in St. Pierre, 2017, p. 687).

When Jack Mezirow's book was published in Italy (2003), we were exploring adult learning studies from a specific interest in organizational learning with other colleagues. We wanted to meet Jack Mezirow and discuss with him to understand Transformative Learning Theory better. We were especially interested in finding new epistemologies committed to thinking about an adult learning theory that was open to new challenges to move the focus from the traditional adult education studies present especially in Europe. In 2006, we organized the first conference in Italy, at the University of Siena. That meeting was followed by others to discuss connections with other theories and the challenges that Transformative Learning posed. We invited Victoria Marsick to Italy for the first time in 2011, and with her, we started a well-established trajectory of scientific exchanges and comparisons. Above all, a fruitful collaboration on the impact of Transformative Learning in organizational and social contexts. Also in 2011, we participated – alongside Claudio Melacarne, Francesca Bracci, and Maura Striano – in the International Conference on Transformative Learning hosted in Athens and organized by the colleague and friend Alexis Kokkos.

I already belonged to a scientific context interested in approaches related to situated learning, the cultivation of communities of practice, and Transformative Learning was another paradigm with which we attempted to answer the same question: how can we support the development and empowerment of individuals, communities, and organizations – starting from their experience as situated people – through the activation and validation of learning processes? The theories called into play identified, albeit from different perspectives, reflexivity as a device for change.

The encounter with Transformative Learning introduced an additional interpretive key on the construct of reflexivity. This is a rational device for analyzing personal experience by making explicit and critically revising the assumptions on which knowledge is structured and justified.

Mezirow recognizes critical reflexivity as the tool for transforming experience meaning and culturally transmitted interpretive structures. Critical reflection – awareness of one's assumptions, premises, criteria, and schemes, followed by vigorous critique – is indispensable and discriminating. Critique and reexamination of the adequacy of prior learning are reflection's distinctive elements.

Reflective practice theory, situated learning theory, and social practice theory preside over multiple aspects: the presence of stories and bodies, the interaction between individuals, artifacts, and contexts, and the creativity and artistry of thinking. One learns through participation in sentimental, cultural, social, and performative practices.

Critical reflexivity is combined with communities of practice. Reflection, in this case, occurs through social interactions, encounters with unfamiliar experiences, and disorienting examples by cultivating those informal aggregations that originate in life and work context. It is necessary to reflect not only on assumptions but also on the organizational individuals' meanings and their reification into material artifacts.

Transformative Learning in Italy has been an accelerator of a debate already grappling with the discussion of critical reflexive forms of rationality in personal, social, and work contexts. What I have described is the terrain on which we have sown Transformative Theory and what distinguishes our research group.

Now, I would like to discuss the new challenges that come with developing our scientific heritage and being surprised by new ideas. I am intentionally leaving my argumentation unfinished because it is still being constructed. As Patti Lather and Elisabeth St. Pierre wrote "we always bring tradition with us into the new, and it is very difficult to think outside our training, which, in spite of our best efforts, normalizes our thinking and doing" (Lather & Pierre, 2013, p. 630).

### **Post-reflexive postures**

Why do I talk about Transformative Learning starting from reflexivity? This construct, whose scientific narrative portrayed it as a device capable of transforming reality, was the first thing that captured my interest. At that time, the scientific debate was

stagnating between positivist paradigms, quantitative methodologies, and ontological realism.

I encountered Transformative Learning theory while conducting my postdoctoral research on the study of practice, during what has been described as a reflexive turn within transdisciplinary trajectories. Since the 80', in Italy reflexivity has become an exemplary paradigm from an epistemological and methodological point of view.

The first trajectory started from organizational studies, particularly from theories of practice. I owe much to Schön (1983), the scholar who founded the theory of reflective practice. His thesis emerged through a thorough analysis of the thinking patterns of professional practitioners in the maker or designer field, that is, those responsible for transforming events. It challenges that form of technical rationality that fails to recognize the complexity of professional epistemologies in organizational practices. Those dealing with value conflicts, disorienting dilemmas, and critical incidents do not rely on technical knowledge alone, nor on scientific rationality alone, but call into question other forms of thinking. Thinking in practice, knowledge in action, and thinking in contexts of high practical density requires the artistic exercise of multiple rationalities (or irrationalities) emerging from situated contexts. These are forms of thinking capable of thematizing the unexpected, and improvising, generating, not just validating, new knowledge in creative ways (Nicolaidis, 2022; Bracci, 2022). This scientific grounding has linked us to the search for plural forms of thinking, not necessarily reducible to rationalist logics. The knowledge that emerges from practice has transformative force because it is embodied in interest and value conflicts. The disorienting dilemmas that characterize the practical world require artistry, intuition, and experience.

The unpredictability of practices, the need to cope with the unexpected, and the incidental learnings that actions bring with them require multiple reasons.

Mezirow, almost simultaneously, recognized critical reflexivity as the most powerful means of validating the premises by which women and men interpret the world. To speak of Transformative Learning is to speak of reflexivity, a construct that has long contained the drifts of positivistic expansionism about the world. The thesis that

learning assumes a transformative value when creating the conditions for subjects to decontextualize their ideas and representations in order to acquire greater awareness of their actions (how they arose, in what specific situation, and what consequences they produced) becomes one of the possible cross-sectional interpretative models. Under what conditions does learning produce transformation? Transformative Theory involves reflexivity, which is defined as an intentional pause that allows one to take a more open-minded view and access analytical thinking. Does it remain anchored in forms of rationality that today we would call universalistic because they are not intersectional?

For the past two decades, our research community has been focusing on incorporating other theories of reflexivity to place this construct within a more complex interpretive framework.

### **Living among plural epistemologies. Loving our lagoons**

When I approached Transformative Learning Theory, I needed to maintain my focus on situative epistemologies and reflective practice theory, with the objective of reorienting the possible and imaginable thinking methodologies.

I provide a brief overview of two constructs dear to my heart: the theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These learning theories allow for the formation of alliances that are both transpersonal and transrational. Throughout my research journey, I have found that both constructs have limited rationalist and individualistic tendencies, unlike, in part, Transformative Learning Theory. These constructs stand far from the risk of a Cartesian interpretation of the reflexive device.

Lave and Wenger's concept of situated learning is associated with the community of practice and with its relational, communicative, cultural, and operational value: "agent, activity and the world mutually constitute one another" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33). Two authors I felt ontologically close to. Anthropologist Jean Lave recalls some studies published at the same time as the 1991 text "Situated Learning". She uses situated learning to respond to those who had described learning as a form of internalizing knowledge or simply sharing knowledge. Based on the study of

circumscribed contexts, situated learning emerges as a process through which a person participates in the community systems of practice to which he or she belongs. Together with Wenger, she proposes a perspective that states that learning, thinking, and knowing are relationships between people active "in and with" the socially and culturally structured world. Learning can be understood as the historical production, transformation and change of people.

This perspective points to a rather diverse field of individuals composed of novices and experts, characterized by asymmetric and peer relationships, more or less accessible and transparent activity systems, and a consequent plurality of forms of participatory relationships (Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Situated learning theory brings in an intersectional idea of Transformative Learning. Paradoxically, we can say that Transformative Learning does not exist. There are as many transformative learnings as there are genders, ethnicities, forms of power, and social class membership. I begin to have the awareness of being a white researcher belonging to Western culture, at constant risk – despite myself – of racializing research.

### **The posthuman perspective. Toward a posthuman theory of Transformative Learning?**

This perspective introduces a distinction between humanist and posthumanist approaches that I have not thematized. I have always started from the humanist assumption that human beings are the main source of agency. Methodologically, I have been interested in human individuals and the objects with which they reify their meanings. I was born a socioconstructivist; moving beyond a neo-positivist idea of the subject/object, nature/culture, mind/body, masculinity/femininity, rationality/irrationality relationship seemed fundamental to me. I'm talking about the 80s. I had few doubts thereafter.

In recent years some encounters, other readings surprise me: for example, non-dualist theories of the interaction between nature and culture. Some theses argue that socioconstructivism is based on a categorical distinction between the given (nature) and the constructed (culture). What does it mean to talk about Transformative



Learning by taking a posthuman perspective? And/or a theory of posthuman subjectivity?

To this day, I know that I plan to make plenty of creative space for these perspectives. Is Transformative Theory grounded in a humanist paradigm? I think so. When we talk about Transformative Learning, does it refer to a universal human, white, and Western attribute? We could answer that in fact Transformative Learning Theory was born based on Mezirow's work with a group of adult women who had resumed their studies, that Transformative Learning is linked to Freire's processes of conscientization, to the Frankfurt Critical School. And this is unquestionably true. We can also say that critical rationality is grounded in a universal rationality that presupposes high symbolic competence to access the transformation of meaning perspectives.

We may add that posthuman theories are emerging at this historical moment. Therefore, taking note of limitations and reductionism means studying possible futures characterized by conceptual uncertainty – uncertainty that guarantees a generative confrontation, whatever the outcome.

Following posthumanism has meant starting to think that we can move beyond how our humanity has been theorized (Braidotti, 2013). What are the aspects of the posthuman that question us? Two colleagues in particular are my primary references. Rosi Braidotti, known through her important trilogy, and Silvia Gherardi.

A fundamental contribution to contemporary epistemologies comes from Braidotti, a feminist philosopher. "The post-human condition is neither post-power nor post-injustice. The emphasis on post in the posthuman implies, rather, a desire to move forward, beyond traditional forms of defining the human and even beyond the politics of classical emancipation" (Braidotti, 2022, p. 17).

"Who or what counts as human in the contemporary world?" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 7). How can we thematize the critique of the humanistic ideal of human as the universal measure of all things? Can the posthuman represent, even for Transformative Theory, a navigational tool, a theoretical figuration that allows us to question the material and discursive phenomena of mutations triggered by technological developments,

feminist studies, and post-colonial epistemologies? What I can say for now is that these questions trigger research paths that aim to highlight the positive potential of posthuman convergence and offer tools to address it positively.

### **The post-qualitative perspective**

Transformative Learning Theory, as well as reflective practice theory, have been a major methodological umbrella. They produced a grid of methodologies for research whose purpose was to create knowledge and promote change. Action science (Argyris & Schön, 1978), action learning (O' Neil & Marsick, 2007), action learning conversations (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009), and collaborative research (Fabbri, 2019; Shani, Guerci & Cirella, 2014) have been deterrents to the neo-positivist wave in an age of big data.

Some colleagues wonder what would happen if we paid less attention to external pressures and changes. Whether it is appropriate to confront the implications of the "post" (Leather & St. Pierre, 2013). As researchers who have adopted a humanist qualitative methodology, how can we think beyond our training? What steps can we take to avoid being and reasoning as researchers who delude themselves into perspectives that Donna Haraway call "ways of being nowhere while claiming to see completely"? She suggests that it pays to replace this claim of universal knowledge with viewpoints "from somewhere" (Haraway, 1991).

### **The sociomaterial perspective**

If we bring the sociomaterial perspective into the domain of Transformative Learning, we need to thematize some issues.

Learning is transformative. It is a happening that invests the sociomaterial dimension. Latour argues that no phenomenon can be adequately described unless individuals abandon artificial distinctions between lines of thought and direct their attention to the empirical reality that people, ideas, objects, artifacts, nature are joined in an intricate web of associations developing over time. Interdisciplinary conversations are open about what it means to be human in the context of people's implications in the planet's fate. What does it mean to be human if human and nonhuman are not individually definable? Neither can be explained in terms of the other if neither has a

privileged status in determining the other (Barad, 2003). What if we think about the meaning perspectives from the assumption that meaning is not a property of individual people, but can be interpreted as a continuous performance of the world in its "differential intelligibility" (Somerville, 2016).

I believe that traditional classifications on different representations of Transformative Theory need to cross more challenging territories.

We are exploring what it means to bring these discussions/conversations into the domain of Transformative Learning analysis. We want to study these elements to explore how they impact Transformative Learning Theory in the post-reflexivity era.

Can we talk about post-reflexivity today? What causes us to critically discuss the theoretical and empirical foundations on which Transformative Learning is based?

These constructs represent some of the challenges that our group is interested in exploring, placing itself within an open-ended show to which something can always be added (Gherardi & Lippi, 2000).

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## **A Sociological Imagination: The Neglected Concept in Transformation Theory**

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### **Introduction**

Malcolm Knowles visited Teachers College as I commenced studying there in 1978. But Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* opened the possibility that adult education could be radical and transformative. In the same year Jack Mezirow (1978) published his theory of perspective transformation. Andragogy was useful but a paradigm shift in the field of adult education had occurred and through multiple iterations over the following decades we are the inheritors of these exciting developments. Mezirow borrowed from Jürgen Habermas whose theory of communicative action he creatively integrated with the theory of transformative learning (TL). Adult education, that traditionally linked itself with the project of democracy, had a new critical theory inspired understanding of adult learning that works towards democracy. It is this connection that makes TL important in a world facing multiple (connected) crises – climate change, radicalizations, the rise of the far right and wars.

### **1. What elements constitute the identity of the theoretical field of Transformative Learning?**

TL is an indigenous theory of adult learning created by adult educators for adults. John Dewey provides the most important source of ideas for TL (e.g., habits of mind, reflection, etc.). Jürgen Habermas, Thomas Kuhn (paradigms) and Paulo Freire (critical consciousness) are also foundational. Insights from many more were borrowed and applied by Mezirow and others. Ideas were adapted from George Kelly (personal constructs), Herbert Fingarette (transformation), Herbert Blumer (symbolic interactionism) and developmental psychologists (Gould Kohlberg, Kegan).

TL also implies ways of teaching. It has also informed research in adult education and beyond. TL offers sensitizing concepts and opportunities to test the theory and develop new areas of education in which TL helps enhance how learning is understood. TL has been less successful at inspiring public policy. All of this is set against a background where lifelong learning has become the dominant construct in which adult learning is promoted, especially within the EU policy environment.

A set of concepts and how they are inter-related defines TL and gives it its identity. These include experience (Dewey), the dilemmas posed by conflicts and contradictions within our meaning making, (critical) reflection on experience, linking individual problems and experience with social issues and through imagination discovering and adopting new constructs more inclusive and integrative of experience. And, taking action on the basis of new assumptions. When linked together in a learning process this set of ideas brings to the fore unquestioned assumptions underpinning actions, thoughts, feelings, values and ideas. TL is so defined. For Dewey, education is the reconstruction of experience. For Mezirow, TL is the transformation of experience. Experience is central to TL – and Dewey and Freire too. Without experience there is no TL.

## **2. What supports and what hinders the formation and development of this field?**

The current dominance of neoliberal capitalism, its impact on individuals and on education, its reductionism, the related mantra of lifelong learning all provide strong head winds for TL. The demise of the public sphere and the lifeworld - colonized by commercial interests - along with the rise of radicalizations are also major forces of resistance. There are also the additional urgencies of climate change, wars, pandemics that reduce the opportunities for time consuming discourses that are essential for TL, thus increasing the urgency of acting decisively and the challenge to transform.

The most recent edition of the well-established *The Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* provides a list of the 'philosophical foundations of adult and continuing education' (Rocco, et al., p. 13) without mentioning Mezirow. Such errors indicate the remaining work to be completed by those in search of a really useful understanding of adult learning – in theory, practice, research and policy formulation.

Having reviewed manuscripts for over 30 journals over 15 years, it appears that there is a decline in how critical theory and social change are addressed by scholars and an increase in attention to individual experience – with a dramatic increase in manuscripts dealing with experiences of one individual. The imbalance is concerning. TL has over-engaged in the subjective and individual nature of learning. Instead of taking experience as the basic ingredient for creating and developing a social theory about how society and individual experiences are connected, a sociological imagination seems to be missing in TL. In addition, the dominance of functional and instrumental versions of adult education shows how the pressure to keep TL continually developing faces an uphill journey, if not active resistance. Finally, the full potential of the allies on which TL relies has not been sufficiently exploited.

### **3. How do you understand the concept of “living theory of TL”?**

Living implies alive, developing, progressing, expanding and then borrowed other disciplines, e.g., law, health education, spirituality, clinical psychology, music, higher education, etc. It implies that both theoretical and practical aspects of TL are moving and deepening by relentless, philosophical and methodological discussions, applications and scholarship. A gradual increase in scholarship emerging from Africa is encouraging.

### **4. How do you perceive the "deep change" that Transformative Learning can bring about?**

Day-to-day changes in understandings that are incremental and iterative so that over time, and when taken together, they can transform frames of reference. I also include dramatic, revolutionary and radical changes in the world view of learners. These are always closer to the kinds of changes originally described by Mezirow but maybe experienced less frequently. Psychoanalysis and critique of ideology continue to best express the process of achieving ‘deep change’. Added to this are the deep changes that include and integrate social transformation as part of TL. These connections are more thoroughly made in critical theory than in TL theory.

## 5. What would you propose to enhance the progress of living theory of TL?

My first student research project, supervised by Jack Mezirow, was to gather (in Butler Library at Columbia University) everything needed to update his (and my) thinking on critical theory. The focus of interest at the time was on Habermas. Discussions over the following 30 years led to published works on expanding the connections between Habermas and TL. This shared commitment to critical theory is the direction in which I suggest TL progress if it is to avoid dominance by the psychological imagination.

The critical theory of Axel Honneth holds promising understandings of recognition and emancipation that help re-define TL in ways that address versions of TL that were overly rational and individualistic. Honneth also helps reconstruct the meaning of emancipation and democracy that are important in TL. In addition, and from the same critical theory perspective, the pedagogical work and adult learning theory of Oskar Negt (with his film producer colleague Alexander Kluge) have allowed a rethink about the importance of the sociological imagination. Critical theorist help reconnect individual and society in our TL thinking.

The psychological imagination holds a dominant position in the theoretical and practical working through of TL. This is an opportune moment to re-integrate the sociological imagination with TL. Though hardly intended by Mezirow, the minor role of the sociological imagination, has led to a gap in the progression of TL. Alfred Schutz and C Wright Mills, both well known to Mezirow, are considered the originators of the theory of sociological imagination as well as pedagogies that support such perspectives. I have attempted to identify the progression routes that are still possible in order for TL to become a critical theory of adult learning and education. I call this a sociological turn in TL.

This work has allowed us understand that the social environment is not just an interesting add-on to experience (see Dewey again) and the process of transformation (e.g., one's individual problems are connected to broader social issues). According to Hegel, on whom Freire relied, these connections are essential and dialectical – one cannot fully comprehend one's own situation, one's experience, one's disorienting



dilemmas without taking into account how the social dimension is in dialectical connection with the psychological. The political is personal.

**6. What is the position of Mezirow's Theory and other perspectives, within this process?**

TL has clearly expanded and been re-interpreted in a diverse universe of possibilities. Important and original re-makes include work that outlines the role of disorienting dilemmas and edge emotional (Green & Mälkki); integrates Heron's theory of personhood (Yorks & Kasl); connects Jung (Boyd & Myres) and soul work (Dirkx and Tisdell). All adapt, borrow, acknowledge, expand an ever-broadening matrix of approaches and produce welcome iterations of TL that enrich the trajectory of the original theory, expand its currency and progress the understanding with which adult learning is understood and facilitated.

**Conclusion**

As successive crises now impose themselves for consideration, only through social transformation is survival possible. If history (implying the destructive process that got us here) is not on our side, maybe the obstinacy (that Negt identifies) may prompt and motivate necessary transformative changes. For those who see in adult education at least a significant part of the response to crises, what is at stake is the very survival of the planet.

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## **Transformative Learning as a Theoretical Field**

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The phenomenon of change, of transformation, is just as relevant today as it was in the seventies when the concept of transformative learning was first developed. One might even argue that transformation has gained even more significance globally. This journal issue is a timely inquiry into the current state of its theoretical development, and we are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the questions posed by the editors.

### **Responses to Questions**

#### **1. What are the elements that constitute the identity of the theoretical field of Transformative Learning?**

Foremost, we see constitutive elements of the theoretical field of TL being the parameters that distinguish it from other forms or dimensions of learning. Other dimensions of learning might include the instrumental, communicative, affective, interpretive, essential, critical, political, or passionate. It is essential that scholars do not act as if all learning is TL or that there are no other dimensions of learning.

In a similar vein, TL does not address learning that brings proficiency in something; learning something well is different than learning something that induces transformative change in the learner. While the overlap between proficiency and transformation is possible, it is only the latter that would connect it to TL.

For a learning outcome to rightfully be considered transformation, it would need to have a significant impact on one or more ways that the person makes sense of, emotionally reacts to, intuitively responds to, behaves in, and otherwise experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world. Such an impact would also need to affect many if not all of the contexts the person inhabits and be permanent (or, at least,

relatively stable) (ibid). There are, of course, no clear-cut boundaries between learning outcomes that are sufficiently impactful as to be considered transformative—and those that are not. Nor are there clear lines between those that affect a sufficient number of a person's lived contexts to be considered transformative—and those that do not. Nevertheless, with these criteria for what a transformation is, the theoretical field of TL is that which addresses the learning processes that lead or might lead to such an outcome.

Another constitutive element of the theoretical field of TL is that it addresses transformation as a learning process. Understood that way, it seeks to explain possibilities for transformation, why it happens, how it happens, the results of it—not a single possible trajectory or type of transformation, but rather the wide range of possibilities. TL as a theoretical field, therefore, seeks to understand and explain the learning processes that drive or facilitate transformation.

## **2. What supports and what hinders the formation and development of this field?**

Scholarly writing is often a lonely enterprise. Because of this, we find the various social arrangements that bring scholars together to be particularly helpful to the formation and development of the theoretical field of TL. Probably foremost are the International Transformative Learning Association (ITLA) and the Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education (TEAE) network of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA), along with their respective (normally bi-annual) conferences. These groups and their conferences not only provide a forum for scholars to present and receive feedback on (often early stages of) their work and provide time and space for focused discussion on TL, they also support social networking and relationship-building, which allow for further collaborations and discussions outside of the conferences. These social connections, the back-and-forth with scholars already familiar with TL theory, its critiques, lacunae, and needs are the driving force of the development of the theory.

The biggest hindrance to the development of TL is a lack of synthesis. We see the literature echoing the numerous critiques of Mezirow's theory again and again, but

there are precious few new iterations of what an adapted version emerging from these critiques might look like. For the other theories, models, and approaches in the literature, we often do not even see critical engagement. It is also common to see new theoretical insights offered via the lens of a particular theorist heretofore not seen in the TL literature, but again, rarely a comprehensive theory emanating from it. We continue to need divergent thinking, but we also need more convergent thinking: synthesizing critiques and insights into new formulations.

### **3. How do you understand the concept of “living theory of TL”?**

After formulating an original systematic conception of transformative learning, Mezirow invited scholars from around the world to further develop the theory, adapting it to new individual and societal contexts and challenges. Hence, he aptly labeled his work a "theory in progress."

In this spirit, we view Mezirow as a trailblazer rather than a prophet.

Mezirow proposed a theory portraying (transformative) learning processes as arduous, painful, and yet meaningful attempts to overcome the limits of one’s thinking and actions. Individuals can be pedagogically guided and supported in this endeavor. Mezirow was aware that there would be many ways to understand the process of TL and therefore also many ways to guide and support it, which is why his theory was intentionally left open for clarification and expansion. The learning process Mezirow proposed is based on dialogical exchange, rooted in the shared exploration of new perspectives and action options. And, being consistent with his views, Mezirow framed his theory as also dialogical and open to further explorations. The “transformative learner” is on a quest for better perspectives, and the theorization about those learning processes is in a constant search for improvement, as well.

Many terms that Mezirow used in his theory have become integral to the lexicon of adult education. We talk ubiquitously about critical self-reflection, disorienting dilemmas, and rational discourse. Mezirow knew that his approach would demand empirical scrutiny through systematic experiments. His colleagues and students took up this task, which led to numerous quantitative analyses, evaluation research, and, notably, qualitative work—for expansion, testing, and further development. In

addition to such processes as critical self-reflection and rational discourse as espoused by Mezirow, methods such as storytelling, art-based pedagogies, and the use of novels and films as methods of transformative learning have been incorporated into the “living theory” of TL. Reflective learning processes in research were also complemented by a deeper exploration of emotions.

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning is an emancipatory theory that connects individual growth with societal development. It is not a theory of personal growth in hermetic spaces. Global problems such as ecological threats, social inequality, radicalization, and the decline of democracy urge us to further develop the theory, adapting it to the specificity of current situations and challenges.

Transformative experiences have become an integral part of adult life. One hears now about the need to develop transformative *skills*—the ability to fundamentally change (again and again) throughout life and be open and willing to make these changes. Mezirow did not explicitly speak of such skills, but his theory and the approaches of his successors make it possible to apply this mindset in various contexts, such as in the realm of education for sustainable development, as is already happening at the supranational level (UNESCO), and in the context of global migration and major societal upheavals.

#### **4. How do you perceive the “deep change” that Transformative Learning can bring about?**

A primary point for us is that transformation holds the potential to result in many, many different outcomes. These results may be deemed as “good” or “bad” or a complex combination of both. It is important for scholars to be careful about using such simplistic labels and instead clarify exactly what they mean about how the person changed and, if important, then elucidate the reasons *why* they categorize that change as positive or negative, good or bad.

Describing the “deep change” that is possible is the purpose of Hoggan’s typology of transformative learning outcomes; it provides scholar’s with categorizations they can use to describe change. For instance, the typology should prompt a scholar to describe, when applicable, how the person changed in their:

- Assumptions about the world and how it operates
- Attitudes
- Expectations
- Ways of interpreting experience
- Complexity or comprehensiveness of their worldviews
- New understandings or awarenesses
- Self-in-Relation to others, the environment, etc.
- Sense of empowerment and/or efficacy to effect change in the world
- Identity
- Self-knowledge
- Personal Narratives
- Meaning and/or purpose of life

And so forth.

It is important to note that a person will not necessarily change in all these ways in every instance of transformation. Nevertheless, we believe that most instances of “deep change” will involve many of these and other types of change, and if scholars are too hyper-focused on only one aspect of change, they will miss many other ways that the person also changed.

##### **5. What would you propose to enhance the progress of living theory of TL?**

To enhance the progress of the living theory of TL, there should be a concerted effort to synthesize already existing diverse perspectives and ideas. This involves bridging gaps between different theories and approaches within the field of transformative learning, in order to create a more cohesive and comprehensive understanding of TL and systematically analyze the vast possibilities for transformation. This synthesis means also that we as researchers should critically engage with the various theories, models, and approaches beyond just Mezirow’s theory; we need to acknowledge and integrate the advancements and refinements made in TL theories made by various

scholars. At the same time, this requires that we avoid treating every instance of learning as transformation; this would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of TL's unique contributions, as well as its limits.

We would also advocate for maintaining the inherently civic-minded emphasis that Mezirow had. This perspective positions learners as co-creators of their shared social and political worlds. We see a need for TL research to evolve around the perception of individuals as active agents capable of altering the circumstances around them and influencing societal change—by contributing meaningfully to the co-shaping of their communities and societies. Learners are not isolated individuals but integral members of a larger societal context. This perspective puts an emphasis on the importance of dialogue and collaboration rather than top-down efforts to transform others. Similarly, there should be a heightened focus on the ethics of transformative learning, ensuring that the process respects individual autonomy, diversity, and societal well-being. Rather than aiming to “transform people,” the emphasis should be on creating an atmosphere conducive to growth and transformation of dysfunctional frames of reference. This involves developing and designing transformative learning sites—physical or virtual spaces—where encounters and dialogues foster collective understanding. These spaces should encourage meaningful interactions, collaborative learning, and the exchange of diverse perspectives.

**6. What is the position of Mezirow's “Transformation Theory”, as well as other theoretical perspectives, within this process?**

Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation holds great significance, but it does not encompass the entirety of the theoretical field of TL. Mezirow initiated the entire scholarly conversation on transformation as a learning process, and his theory is one of very few comprehensive theories of transformative learning that has been offered. Personally, we find his proposed learning processes of critical self-reflection, critical dialogue, and perspective-taking, if used carefully, appropriate for many learning contexts. (We are highly skeptical of the ethics of trying to transform other people, and we find Mezirow to be appropriately careful about when and how to engage in learning processes that might promote perspective transformation.)

Despite all this, Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation is not and should not be considered the only way of conceiving transformative learning. The field benefits from embracing a plurality of perspectives, fostering a more nuanced exploration of transformative learning beyond his initial theoretical approach.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Exploring these questions highlights the richness of perspectives and challenges that define the theoretical field of TL. To conclude, we want to emphasize the need for clarity in defining transformation and encourage scholars (including ourselves) to engage critically with diverse theories and build on existing scholarship rather than echoing the same critiques. TL has emerged not as a static concept but as a dynamic collective endeavor and it is a pleasure to be a part of its continuing development.



## **Re-imagining the future of transformative learning theory for underrepresented communities**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a reflection of our understanding of Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Both our present understanding (and interpretation) of, and our re-imagining of the potential that the theory holds, are informed by our identity as African women. Although, that identity suggests underrepresentation, we also see in it agency and potential to bring in additional analytic tools that stem from our way of knowing, living and being.

### **Key words**

Context, Marginalised communities, relational principles, transformative learning, Ubuntu,

### **Introduction**

This paper is a reflection of our understanding of Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Both our present understanding (and interpretation) of, and our re-imagining of the potential that the theory holds, are informed by our identity as African women. Although, that identity suggests underrepresentation, we also see in it agency and potential to bring in additional analytic tools that stem from our way of knowing, living and being.

### **1. What are the elements that constitute the identity of the theoretical field of Transformative Learning?**

*Perspective transformation*

According to Mezirow's transformative learning (TL) theory, learning is transformative when it "transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change" (2003, pp. 58). The theory is based on the belief in the capacity for adults to change from previously set perspectives (Hoggan, 2022; Mezirow 2008).

### *Critical reflection*

Mezirow (2003) describes the TL theory as a "uniquely adult form of metacognitive reasoning" (pp. 58). He emphasises the role of distinctly adult capabilities of critical reflection and reflective judgment as necessary for dialectical discourse.

### *Metacognition*

Mezirow emphasises the role of individual cognition (expressed through assessing reasoning in both instrumental and communicative learning). He however, mentions a social dimension when he refers to the role of critical dialectical discourse in "assessing the beliefs of others to arrive at a tentative best judgment" (pp. 59).

### *Individual Agency*

Transformative learning emphasises individual agency and the capacity for individuals to actively participate in their own transformation. However, being in a position of social disadvantage can constrain ability to engage in dialectical reasoning, and that can lead those marginalised to "commit themselves to economic, cultural and social action initiatives" as a way of countering exclusion (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 60).

### *Transformative learning can be taught*

Although adults may acquire adult capabilities for transformative learning through natural development, Mezirow (2003) shows that these capabilities must be taught in order to "foster the ability to reason...and to become a more active and rational learner" (pp. 62).

## **2. What supports and what hinders the formation and development of this field?**

### *Supportive aspects to the formation and development of the field of TL theory*

*Continuous, open and robust engagement:* Since the development of the transformative learning theory in 1978, the field has been characterised by robust engagement part of which has sought clarity on what constitutes transformative learning. The recent call which culminated in *The Palgrave handbook of learning for transformation* is a case in point.

*Embracing diversity:* International calls for contributions to conferences, books and graduate programmes based on the TL theory bring together a diversity of ideas that further develop the field of transformative learning. It is this open engagement, and embracing of diverse understandings, that will expand current understandings of transformative learning (Nicolaidis & Eschenbacher, 2022). Calling for, and publishing books, handbooks and conference proceedings becomes a library that stocks contributions from diverse contexts. Over time, these contributions get synthesised and this way, the theory further grows contextually relevant nuances. And the transformative learning theory is likely to develop more when its application in diverse contexts is better understood.

*Potential hindrances to the development of the field of transformative learning*

*Emphasis on rationality:* Admittedly, transformative learning, whether at the instrumental, communicative or emancipatory domain, it is a mental process. It is the intended outcome of such learning that we think is currently limited to achieving “learner’s skills, habit of the mind, disposition, and will to become a more active and rational learner” (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 62). Mezirow himself mentions previous criticism regarding this emphasis on rationality which gave the impression that the theory was decontextualizing learning (2008). While he clearly acknowledges the role of context in learning - “Who learns what and the when, where and how of education are clearly functions of the culture” (2008, pp.103) – the role of reason is still overly emphasised.

*Emphasis on individual cognition at the expense of collective responsibility:* Transformative learning theory makes no clear mention of forms of learning that are outside of the ‘Western’ canon of reason. Non-Western ways of learning and being are not only based on “I think, therefore I am”, but more based on “I am because I

participate". The ways of knowing for many Indigenous peoples are based on this principle, which is often dismissed as not being rigorous. We argue that if the judgement of transformative learning outcomes does not include performative knowledge, transformative learning could miss out on how diversity can influence what we know and how we express it. We therefore concur with Hoggan (2022) on the need for clarity of criteria about what constitutes transformational learning.

### *Misrecognition*

It is noted that the foundation of transformative learning theory is in adult education. We identify two points that we interpret as requiring continued debate for clarity. Firstly, if self-reflection and reflective judgment are "adult capabilities" (Mezirow, 2003), who is an adult learner? What are the conditions necessary for the development of these capabilities? To what extent do the marginalised have or not have these capabilities - considering Mezirow's assertion that "hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute, and intimidated peoples cannot participate fully and freely in discourse"? Are these adult capabilities, "which are indispensable conditions for fully understanding the meaning of our experience and effective rational adult reasoning in critical discourse and communicative learning" (Mezirow, 2003 pp. 60) absent in poor, sick, or destitute adults or in young people? What hope is there for their emancipation? Where in TL theory is the forum for the marginalized to participate and be heard? Who is going to engage the privileged for them to be able to examine their own assumptions, in the absence of the voice and reflective judgement from the marginalised themselves?

Secondly, if the same marginalised cannot fully and freely participate in discourse, which forces them into social action, what could possibly lead them to that social action if it is not the transformation of problematic frames of reference that would have defined their state in the first place? This relates to our earlier argument that transformative learning cannot only consist in reasoning that is articulated verbally and /or in written form. We argue that action is an outward expression of transformative learning, not a condition of it. We view the thinking that assumes the exclusion of the marginalised from discourse as based on privilege, and that for us that

itself is a problematic frame of reference. Formerly colonised states have gained political independence by resistance and/or dialogue.

In the South African context, protest are a common expression of resistance, and higher education institutions have not been spared. The infamous Fees Must Fall protests and related calls for the decolonisation of South African higher education in 2015 and 2016 could have been an illustration of disorienting dilemmas and subsequent transformative learning that happened among students, but was unfortunately misrecognized. After the protests, what followed were numerous deliberations on the meaning of decolonisation, with little meaningful transformation of higher education actually happening. We are not entirely convinced that marginalised people are somewhat incapable of engaging in transformative learning.

#### *Learning and being*

We see a third factor that may hinder the development of transformative learning. This stems not from the theory itself, but from its application within the context of the influence of worldviews that encourage atomistic existence of phenomena, for example, separating work from life, and knowledge from the knower. Where reality is understood more holistically, it is hard to separate our work from the core of who we are. As a result, transformative learning is not reduced to classroom work, but expanded to day-to-day living. Opportunities for personal transformation may be missed if as educators we fail to see that how our work is directly connected to our being, our environment, our culture, social class, etc. We then fail to appropriately examine taken-for-granted assumptions that shape our own thinking and our work. We may then desire transformation in others and fail to require it of ourselves.

#### *'Publish or perish'*

The policies in higher education that promote research and research publications over teaching and learning may hinder TL theory advancement for classroom practitioners. The application of transformative learning theory may not constitute singular transformative events. Transformative learning maybe a culmination of many learning events which take place over a long time (Hoggan, 2022). Champions of transformative learning in higher education may need to continually answer to the

requirement to measure benefits of applying the theory in causal and quantitative terms. The assumption that 'what cannot be quantified has not happened' is a threat to those who would like to try out transformative learning theory in their teaching. We welcome Hoggan's (2022) Typology of Transformative Learning Outcomes (Hoggan 2022) as helpful in researching the classroom application of transformative learning theory.

### **3. How do you understand the concept of "living theory of TL"?**

The TL theory provides a lens and the language to explain what can be done and felt in teaching, learning, research, and everyday life situations. Its elements can be embodied in our actions, behaviors, and experiences. The uniqueness and strength of transformative learning as a living theory is in that potential to influence daily life, and on the local and global scales. Engaging with the theory requires going beyond intellectual understanding of its tenets, to individuals living out transformed lives. And that is what a 'living theory' should do - permeating the day-to-day life and practice of the educator/researcher.

The elements of a living theory are not static: Boundaries are extended as new understandings develop – increasingly developing capacity to be responsive diverse contexts. As proponents and practitioners adopt an attitude of life-long learning, all transformation effectively becomes on-going. Time-bound learning programmes such as conferences, seminars, courses and degrees, which are meant to equip us with knowledge and skills come to an end. However, at the end of such programmes, the resultant practical application of new knowledge can bring with it transformative dimensions in learning.

### **4. How do you perceive the "deep change" that Transformative Learning can bring about?**

Nicolaides and Eschenbacher (2022) highlight the need to distinguish between change and transformation. Our experience (living in a post-colonial state) includes regular references to transformation with change being only superficial. Transformative learning is understood to be from inside out, manifesting in sustained, visible transformed attitudes and behaviours. In explaining his definition of transformative

learning as a metatheory, Hoggan (2022) illustrates what we perceive as deep, holistic change, happening at three levels:

There is a change in *thinking* (“conceptualizes”), e.g., how one views the world, how one knows and interacts with knowledge. There are also changes in how a person *exists* in the world (“experiences”), e.g., how one feels on a moment-to-moment basis in various situations, how one reacts viscerally, how one perceives herself in relation to others or to the world in general. And, of course, there is a change in *behavior* (“interacts”), whether that is knee-jerk reactions to stimuli or purposeful engagement in new activities (pp. 95, our emphasis).

Deliberations on transformation that end at the level of reasoning, but are not accompanied by transformed attitudes and behaviours cannot qualify as transformative. Deep change should be about shifting away from a ‘window-dressing’, to change that is deep-seated in habits of the mind, as Mezirow emphasises. Calls to decolonise education and research continue globally because what the marginalised see and experience are probably only superficial changes which do not change their life circumstances. Therefore, deep change should be life-changing. In our context, deep change should also be about recognising and critically reflecting on privileges and the assumptions that shape them. This how we can be empathetic towards those less privileged e.g. our students, our junior colleagues, our communities. Deep change in TL cannot be not neutral, and just ‘for-knowledge’s sake’.

## **5. What would you propose to enhance the progress of living theory of TL?**

### *Application in context*

One size does not fit all. It would be beneficial to understand what learning for transformation looks like in different contexts: What are the worldviews and privileges that shape prevailing frames of reference? What should we be transforming to become, in that context?

### *Transforming in relationship*

All learning in social context, and so does transformative learning. The TL theory should prompt us interrogate our contexts in relational ways. The Southern African

Ubuntu worldview (see Nyamupangedengu & Khupe, 2021) which embodies relational principles such as care, respect, humility, and collective responsibility, can provide additional analytic tools for TL theory in relevant contexts. That way the focus of transformative learning would in relation to others.

### *Language*

Theories are often developed and written in a language that is immersed in philosophical thinking, which may not be 'accessible' to audience who are not first language speakers. We suggest continued and sustained dialogue on the theory and practice of TL in a language that is 'transformed' enough to be accessible to the global diversity of readers.

### *Waiting for adulthood is rather late*

We appreciate Mezirow's description of transformative learning as a uniquely adult endeavor, and that transformative learning can be taught. For the swift pace at which change is happening globally, from pandemics, to wars, human displacement to natural disasters, we suggest considering applying TL theory earlier than adulthood. That way the theory will have wider reach and impact.

## **6. What is the position of Mezirow's "Transformation Theory", as well as other theoretical perspectives, within this process?**

The TL theory is an important foundation from which we have come to think about transformation generally, as well as the transformative dimensions of learning. It is the footing from which we can apply transformation to different fields e.g. teaching, assessment, research, across disciplines and in life generally. The theory provides the language and a lens with which to describe and explain the process of transformation that we may experience in ourselves, or seek to foster in others.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Our experience of working with this theory has sensitised us and made us more critically conscious of issues in education and other areas of socio-cultural life in which the frames of references of the under-represented have been systematically invalidated and/or silenced. The transformative learning theory created in us an



awareness and critical consciousness of our agency in seeking validation for ways of knowing of the marginalised.

### **Conflict of interest**

We declare no conflicts.

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## **Transformative learning theory, theoretical field or metatheory?**

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### **Introduction**

In the present response to the journal's survey, I mainly discuss the present state of affairs of the transformative learning (TL) theoretical framework. I argue that, on the one hand, various theoretical contributions have significantly expanded and enriched Jack Mezirow's initial conceptualization. On the other hand, the ever-increasing theoretical views led to the fragmentation of the theoretical field and to uncertainty as regards its components and terminology. Accordingly, I claim that a collective metatheoretical work that should attempt to seek for points of agreement and synthesize the various perspectives might favor the development of a more integrated TL theoretical framework.

### **1. What are the elements that constitute the identity of the theoretical field of Transformative Learning?**

The TL theoretical field examines various ways in which emancipatory changes can take place in the frame of reference, in self-awareness, and in the behavior of the learners, groups or organizations. To achieve these, participants engage with all their cognitive, affective, psychic, somatic, and imaginative energies.

### **2. What favors and what hinders the formation and development of this identity?**

At the societal level, enlightened social movements and emancipatory educational settings both contribute to fostering new understandings about TL, thus advancing the theoretical discussion in this field. Conversely, the dominance of entrepreneurial and instrumental rationality, the diffusion of discriminative and populist mentality, and the allure of stability hinder the development of the field's identity.

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<sup>2</sup>HAEA is intensively oriented towards transformative learning. All its 280 members are also members of the International Transformative Learning Association.

Within the framework of TL theory, the ever-increasing enrichment by new perspectives is an important reinforcing factor. However, the abundance of divergent emerging conceptualizations, has gradually eroded the coherence and rigor of the field (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Dirkx, 2012a; Hoggan, 2018; Illeris, 2014; Kokkos, 2020). Within TL literature, the new alternative views are highlighted, while the difficulties brought about by the coexistence of divergent conceptions are rather overlooked. With the view that the acknowledgment of deficiencies is a prerequisite for overcoming them, the following paragraphs focus on the processes that led to the field's actual status.

Mezirow's work in 1978 provided the initial impetus for the formulation of the theoretical framework of TL. From then until the end of the 20th century, the field experienced rapid development, largely centered around Mezirow's *Transformation Theory*. By the end of the 1980s, however, various alternative conceptions of TL had emerged. Furthermore, Taylor (1998) identified several gaps and tensions associated with the initial conceptualization.

At this stage, specifically in 1998, Mezirow took the initiative to hold the first TL Conference. At this meeting, Mezirow (Aalsburg Wiessner & Mezirow, 2000) outlined the theoretical field of TL as a puzzle with scattered pieces, and invited TL scholars "to connect the pieces of the puzzle to create a picture of transformative learning" (p.129). In the context of the Conference, it was felt that such a collective process could lead to an expanded "theory of transformative learning" (ibid, p. 332). Moreover, insofar as a community of ongoing inquiry would be established, the theoretical work on TL could be seen as a "theory in progress", as implied in the subtitle of the book that occurred from the Conference (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). However, Mezirow emphasized that achieving this goal required a fundamental condition to be fulfilled: transformative learning scholars should collaborate to explore interconnections among their diverse perspectives and synergistically develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework that would continue to evolve. As stated by Aalsburg-Wiessner and Mezirow (2000, p. 356), "There is still much to learn about transformative learning. But the greater challenge is to work towards finding common ground among our diverse but related theories of learning."

In the years that followed, certain scholars made significant contributions toward an integrated understanding of TL. They achieved this by merging the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning, as demonstrated, indicatively, by Hoggan, Illeris, Kasl, Malkki, Marieneau, E. Taylor, K. Taylor, and Yorks. Additionally, they emphasized the interplay between the individual and the social context, as exemplified, for example, by Clover, Finnegan, Fleming, and Pope. Some endeavored to build connections between critical reflection on assumptions and psychological processes, as seen in the work of Cranton or in the published dialogue between Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton (2006). Others sought to draw associations between Mezirow's theory and other emancipatory perspectives, as explored by Eschenbacher, Flemming, Callegos, Kokkos, Marsick, Shapiro, Wasserman, and Watkins, among others. However, these unifying attempts have not been the dominant trend in the field. Most scholars remained committed to their unit of analysis, possibly because they sought to respond to tensions that emerged in the theoretical field or to highlight the importance of a specific view. Undoubtedly, through this process, the initial perception of TL was significantly broadened to include dimensions that were missing in Mezirow's theory, such as, affective, expressive, and imaginative ways of knowing, relational learning, embodied learning, soul work, spirituality, identity development, art-based learning, race-centric, neurobiological, planetary, and social-emancipatory views, sustainability learning, organizational learning, and so on. However, the continual expansion of the theoretical framework also led to its fragmentation, accompanied by confusion regarding its constituent components and terminology. Consequently, the pursuit of common ground, previously deemed essential for the development of a transformative learning theory, was diminished.

In 2012, Cranton & Taylor (2012) eloquently described the current state of the field using the expression "problem and blessing" (p. 14). The "blessing", was about the various new and meaningful views. The "problem" constituted the other side of the coin (p. 10):

As a result, there are growing pains in the form of varied understandings of what transformative learning is and is not, seemingly conflicting perspectives on the learning process

involved, and unresolved issues related to theory development, which may in turn be creating stagnation in research and theory.

In recent years, a number of scholars argued that a fragmented state that hinders the formation of theory's identity remains in the field of TL. For instance, Nicolaides & Eschenbacher (2022) underlined the lack of general agreement on the fundamental aspects of the theory: "There are many essential differences among the various threads of transformative learning theory, on everything from the definition of transformative learning, its aims and goals, its desired outcomes, its processes, and its usefulness in pedagogy and in practice" (p.10). Hoggan (2016) in turn, claimed that "the term 'transformative learning theory' is increasingly being used to refer to almost any instance of learning" (p.57).

In light of the above, certain scholars (e. g., Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023; Hoggan & Higgins, 2023; Kokkos, 2020) claimed that the theoretical framework of TL is actually a collection of theoretical contributions, often distinct to each other, therefore assuming that the term "TL theory" is rather inaccurate. This conceptualization leads to the subsequent question: how can a more comprehensive and integrated theoretical framework for TL be developed? This question is explored in Section 5.

### **3. How do you understand the concept 'living theory'?**

'Living' is a theory that does not cease to review its own components, while remaining open to organically incorporate meaningful elements drawn from other theoretical perspectives or research findings. According to what was mentioned in Section 2, the theoretical current state of TL could be understood as a living theoretical field.

### **4. How do you perceive the 'deep change' that TL can bring about?**

The concept of deep change could be synthetically derived through the following considerations. Illeris (2014) argues that deep change involves a transformation at the core of one's identity. According to Mezirow (1991), deep change occurs through the transformation of assumptions that we have adopted through the process of our socialization. Dirkx (2012b) argues that the deep perspective transformation emphasizes relational, emotional, and largely unconscious issues. Hoggan (2016)

identifies three dimensions of deep change: its profound impact, its manifestation across a wide range of contexts, and the irreversibility of TL outcomes.

### **5. What would you propose to enhance the progress of the theoretical field of TL?**

About 15 years ago, Gunnlaugson (2008) introduced the idea of establishing a metatheoretical discourse among TL scholars. The aim would be “to more adequately evaluate and critically analyze existing TL theories and in turn restore a more shared focus, set of assumptions, and principles of TL theory and practice” (p.134). Furthermore, Gunnlaugson recommended processes that could help the development of the metatheoretical work (comparing and contrasting the multiple dimensions and expressions of TL, synthesizing the various views, and establishing a metalanguage with interrelated terms).

Hoggan (2016) brought Gunnlaugson’s suggestion back to the floor. He argued, together with Higgins (Hoggan, 2016, 2018; Hoggan & Higgins 2023) that TL literature has acquired the quality of a metatheory, and suggested processes that could reinforce the metatheoretical work, such as searching for points of agreement, accommodating old critiques and developing novel ones on TL literature, as well as formulating conceptual tools that function as a common vocabulary.

In response to these ideas, I think that a metatheoretical work could offer significant impetus to the formation of a more integrated TL theoretical framework. Accordingly, the question arises: how could a comprehensive metatheory of transformative learning emerge? The experience of the last 25 years has shown that scholarly suggestions are not enough. Therefore, an in-depth discourse might take place within the whole TL community, under the auspices of ITLA, with the aim of identifying whether it is appropriate to build a metatheory. To the extent that a consensus would emerge, systematic metatheoretical work and relevant research could take place. In general, it might be considered as crucial to equally acknowledge both the development of fruitful new conceptualizations *and* the endeavor to associate them, as much as possible, with the rich background of other perspectives. In this light, the ongoing pursuit of collaboratively constructing a more comprehensive living theoretical field of TL could gradually be realized.

**6. What is the position of Mezirow’s “Transformation Theory”, as well other theoretical perspectives, within this process?**

Mezirow’s *Transformation Theory* is the initial conceptualization of TL and the most frequent reference point in TL literature. Therefore, *Transformation Theory* should be seen as one of the main sources of the TL metatheoretical work. Other perspectives should also be constituents of the metatheory, while seeking common ground and affinities between the various theorizations.

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## **Unveiling and challenging the identity, formation, and evolution of Transformation Theory**

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### **Introduction**

In this contribution we delve into the established and emerging facets that shape the theoretical landscape of the theory of transformation. From its conventional elements like critical reflection and disorienting dilemmas to the overlooked aspects such as the somatic dimension, our discussion contemplates the multifaceted nature of transformative learning. We argue that beyond the positive evolution of the theory with diverse perspectives that have enriched the field, challenges still persist. We recognize transformative learning theory as an ongoing, dynamic paradigm capable of responding organically to the contemporary personal and social challenges. Our discussion calls for a deeper exploration of the theory's potential for profound change, emphasizing the need to move beyond its dominant cognitive dimension. We also advocate for interdisciplinary dialogue and the integration of diverse perspectives to foster progress within transformative learning theory and emancipatory educational practice.

## **The Theoretical Realm of Transformative Learning: “common stones” and “rare jewels”**

Many of the elements that currently constitute the identity of transformative learning discourse such as critical reflection, rational discourse, disorienting dilemmas or crisis and radical questioning have been around for many years. At the same time, to our opinion, important elements are rarely part of the discourse, such as the somatic dimension (e.g. Tsouvala, & Magos, 2016; Weig, 2023). Although rationality in transformative learning practices has been criticized it seems that we continue to understand and engage with adults in a way that almost seems as if they are just brains. Even though we do have a better understanding of the affective dimension of transformation we highlight the cognitive, rational one. We turn away from emotions, especially from those that are considered as being unpleasant (Mälkki, 2019). Instead of creating an environment that offers a learning opportunity where we can listen to the dark and to the unknown (see Nicolaidis, 2022), so that those participating can find re-gain a sense of direction for themselves, we expect them to engage in rational discourse, pretending that there is a hierarchy-free speech situation. Since we, as educators are the ones with power, we are rarely joining these conversations and remain in a safe place, not radically questioning our own assumptions, not feeling the discomfort of transformative learning. Additionally, and although Mezirow (1991) was very explicit on the role of language in transformative learning there is a sense that the limited research on this significant element towards transformation (see Grzegorzczak 2018) highlights a critical gap in our understanding of how linguistic dynamics intricately contribute to and shape the profound shifts in individuals' meaning perspectives.

### **Facilitative Ideas and Impediments in the field of Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning theory has developed quite rapidly over the last forty years together with other learning theories. Soon after the original theory proposed by Mezirow (1978) a wide range of developments, approaches, models, and research emerged in both the US and Europe. As a unique adult learning theory, it has become popular, influential, and central in adult education research and practice. Several elaborations have enriched, broadened, and led to multiple lines of inquiry or even

alternative pathways within transformational learning (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023). Significant differences have emerged regarding the emphasis on either personal or social change, the focus on either processes or outcomes of transformation, the role of cultural challenges and urgencies, and the definition of transformation that we as a diverse community of scholars and researchers have agreed upon. All these efforts to evolve and expand the theory of transformation have worked as facilitators for its further development. However, at the same time these heterogeneous approaches have also led to significant problems and concerns. Theorists and researchers raised questions about the lack of critical engagement with theory, confusion about what is transformative and what supports transformation, and getting stuck in the original theory without exploring its contribution to current social emergencies (e.g. Howie & Bagnall 2013; Pang, Cox, & Acheson 2023). We believe that engagement in a dialogical horizontal movement where empowerment is enhanced by shared power, may lead to further development with more adventurous, creative, and perhaps risky emancipatory initiatives. Moreover, the field may be further developed by encouraging collaboration between networks, both national and international and by building strong community relations among researchers and practitioners with an aim to become engaged in participatory research that has a transformative impact that goes beyond academia and is socially recognized.

### **Transformative Learning Theory as a Living Theory**

Transformative learning theory is a theory of adult learning and education for transformation. From our point of view, we consider it as an ongoing and dynamic theoretical and research paradigm that may assist us in exploring and understanding how and under what conditions adult learning leads to the transformation of meaning systems and produces deep shifts in personal behavior and collective actions. However, we believe that transformative learning theory as a framework consists of an inherently “paradoxical” body of knowledge that needs to evolve. This evolution which is the essence of the term “living” has to be a process of reflexive-understanding of the process of transformation to respond organically to the contextual challenges of the current and agitated social reality.

### **Unveiling the Impact: Exploring Profound Change in Transformative Learning**

Stephen Brookfield (2000) describes transformative learning as a shift in the tectonic plates of one's assumptive clusters. He also understands it as a process that can be a somewhat apocalyptic, cognitive event. This idea of transformative learning as a cognitive event reveals where the theory still falls short. We have gained new insights and ideas regarding the affective dimension through Kaisu Mälkki's work (Mälkki, 2019), what is yet missing, as we have mentioned above, is the somatic dimension. We continue to understand adult learning processes as mainly cognitive and underestimate, even forget about the somatic dimension of transformation, to mention only one avenue that needs further investigation. When we think about transformative learning as a mainly cognitive, rational event, then we reduce the theory to an epistemic, cognitive transformation. We fail to account for the personally transformative dimension it has – or should have in order to be considered transformative. If it does not *feel* different to live our lives or being who we are, the transformation remains shallow. The deep change transformative learning can bring is tied to contingency, to *knowing* and *feeling* that our way of being in the world is one among others. It is an experience of uncertainty. Learning that there are always other possibilities that can be explored, that we are not trapped by one way of looking at the world or *being* in the world that is forced on us, is central to deep or profound change. If we are able to transform our guiding assumptions and to continue having doubts about them, we gain a lived experience of deep change and transformation.

### **A Proposal to Enhance the Progress of Transformative Learning as a Living Theory**

To our view progress in transformative learning theory requires interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-fertilization with new perspectives in adult learning, such as the somatic dimension of learning and transformation, complex informal and incidental learning processes (e.g., Watkins, & Marsick, 2023), socio-materiality (e.g., Fabbri, & Melacarne, 2022), intersectionality, biographical, generative, and affective knowledge (e.g., Nicolaidis, 2022). Moreover, we need to further investigate the dialectical relationship between transformation theory with philosophical paradigms that may enlighten and deepen our understanding of the human learning process (e.g. Eschenbacher, 2019). We strongly believe that the community of transformative

learning scholars and researchers should work together to develop new conversations that may lead to the reconceptualization of transformation theory that will incorporate insights from different theoretical frameworks and actors.

### **Of Mezirow and Other Demons of Transformation Theory**

Jack Mezirow has always understood transformation theory as a theory *in progress*. His notion of transformative learning is concerned with questioning one's core assumptions. Yet we need to radically question the core assumptions of transformation theory itself, to keep it as a theory in progress. The theory rests on certain philosophical assumptions. And we need to wonder whether the philosophical grounding supports our ideas of transformation or not. If we remain tied within an Habermasian idea of rational discourse that is tangled to the public sphere, can we keep the theory alive? How do we ever really go beyond rational, cognitive pathways to transformation? Can we reconcile the idea of transformative learning with its practice? And if we want to transform the theory itself, shouldn't we start with transforming its core assumptions? We need to broaden transformation theory, to include the private sphere as most of the research is carried out in this sphere. One possible way forward is to turn towards a philosophical foundation that considers both, the public and the private sphere. Richard Rorty for example suggests an attitude he describes as the concept of irony, an attitude that doubts our own vocabulary in a radical and unceasing way (Eschenbacher, 2019). In the case of transformation theory, we need to be doubtful about transformative learning being a cognitive, rational process, one that always only ever leads to positive results and outcomes. We need to shed light to the challenging, at times darker side of transformative learning as well, to the terrifying, dangerous side of questioning one's assumption (Morrice, 2013). To the part where we lose something we hold dearly, where we emancipate ourselves from somethings that has provided guidance for so long. This includes philosophical ideas that constitute transformative learning as well as our own, private ideas. We need to remain open to new vocabularies regarding transformative learning and transformation if we want the theory to transform itself.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In this paper we tried to knit threads of established beliefs and emerging dimensions that exist or need to exist in the domain of transformative learning theory. In our endeavor we discussed the overlooked aspects of transformative learning while we illuminated the transformative potential that is inherent in the affective and somatic dimensions. We recognized that during the evolution of transformative learning, the inclusion of diverse perspectives has definitely enriched the field, yet we support the idea that challenges persist on the horizon. Navigating through facilitative ideas and acknowledging impediments, we tried to present the complexity inherent in transformative learning processes. Although we acknowledge that transformative learning as a dynamic paradigm primed to respond to contemporary challenges, we call for a move beyond the cognitive understanding of its process. We also call for a critical examination of its philosophical foundations, the further research for transformation in complex informal and incidental learning processes and the consideration of intersectionality, generative, biographical, and affective knowledge. Considering the need for new philosophical understandings we highlighted the necessity of embracing new vocabularies and alternative frameworks. In our opinion transformative learning may continue its evolution through continuous questioning, openness, and a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics that define the human learning experiences. Finally, as the Convenors of the Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education Network (ESREA), through this paper we extend an invitation to researchers and practitioners to become part of our network. We welcome your participation in an intellectually stimulating journey within the realm of transformative learning.

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## **Transformative Learning as a Part of Living Theory: A Constant Evolution of Transformative Learning Theory in Lifelong Education**

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Transformative Learning Theory is one of the major adult learning theories. It has gained significant attention due to its potential to revolutionize education and personal development. Although its popularity has made it branch out from the adult learning theories as a distinct theory with unique characteristics and utilizations, the field of Transformative Learning has fallen into its own disorienting dilemma. The field of Transformative Learning is now in a critical phase as a field of study where it needs to refine itself to better develop its identity and grow. In this article, I will respond to the six questions regarding Transformative Learning Theory and the field of Transformative Learning that the editorial team of the journal asks below.

### **1. What are the elements that constitute the identity of the theoretical field of Transformative Learning?**

Transformative Learning Theory is situated in the adult education theories where it focuses on the combination of several key elements: transformation and change in one's perspective from their life experiences, and critical examination of those experiences that together produce a dynamic shift in one's perspective or way of seeing the world (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 2009). Transformative Learning leads individuals to go beyond acquiring new knowledge or skills and leads to a significant change in how individuals understand themselves in a specific context. To get there, they need to go through critical reflection (Brookfield, 2012; Fleming, 2022). Transformative Learning requires individuals to engage in deep self-dialogue and critical reflection on their assumptions, beliefs, and values and emphasizes the importance of dialogue and discourse in the learning process (Taylor, 2000). Engaging in meaningful conversations with others and exploring diverse viewpoints can

contribute to transformative change. However, individuals may have to deal with their own emotions and manage those throughout the transformative learning process. Transformative Learning recognizes the importance of emotions and personal experiences in the learning process (Dirkx, 2006). It acknowledges that transformative change often involves emotional and sometimes difficult experiences. All of these involve questioning and challenging existing ideas and exploring alternative perspectives.

In addition, for individuals to experience and process Transformative Learning, it is crucial for them to consider how social and cultural contexts influence the process. So, Transformative Learning acknowledges that learning is shaped by social and cultural factors. It recognizes the influence of societal structures, power dynamics, and cultural norms on individuals' learning experiences (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). At the same time, Transformative learning is not just about personal growth but also it aims to encourage action to make positive changes in society. It encourages individuals to apply their learning to address societal challenges and work towards social justice (Misawa, 2022). These elements collectively constitute to the identity of Transformative Learning as a theoretical field that focuses on personal and societal transformation through critical reflection, dialogue, and action.

## **2. What supports and what hinders the formation and development of this field?**

When considering Transformative Learning as a theoretical field, it is crucial to have a consideration of how the formation and development of the field of Transformative Learning can be supported. One of the important elements that contributes to the formation and development of the field is a supportive educational environment. Creating such an environment is important because it encourages critical thinking, self-reflection, and open dialogue, which is crucial to Transformative Learning (Fleming, 2022; Mezirow, 2000). This includes having educators who are knowledgeable about Transformative Learning Theory and who are committed to facilitating the process of Transformative Learning. Having such an educational

environment supports the formation and development of the field of Transformative Learning.

In addition, having a access to a network and community is important when we think about the formation and development of the field. Conferences, workshops, journals, books, and online resources that provide information about Transformative Learning are useful and can gain some attraction and attention. Since the field is growing, educational and professional opportunities like national and international conferences can become a great support and opportunity for the field to engage not only in its own communities but also those from other fields. That also fosters collaboration, teaching-learning, and sharing experiences. Resources like that can support the field of Transformative Learning.

On the other hand, several factors can hinder the formation and development of the field of Transformative Learning. The current challenge, at least in some states in the US, is the resistance to change and the desire to maintain the status quo in educational institutions and societal systems (Misawa, 2010, 2022). Anything critical and different from conventional social and cultural norms and standards can be scrutinized by politicians and lawmakers and suppressed. For instance, some of the southern states in the United States now have a law that prohibits teaching so-called “divisive” concepts mainly including critical perspectives on race (Critical Race Theory) and LGBT issues. Perhaps, this relates to a lack of understanding about critical perspectives and transformative education among policymakers and the general public. These political and legal prohibitions hinder the formation and development of the field and can make it difficult for transformative learning approaches to be integrated into conventional educational structures and society at large. Overcoming these barriers requires a collective effort to advocate for the value and benefits of transformative learning and to create supportive environments that foster its growth and development.

### **3. How do you understand the concept of “living theory of TL”?**

Scholars have discussed an interrelated connection between Living Theory and Transformative Learning Theory. The concept of Living Theory has been utilized in a wide variety of fields like education, psychology, and sociology and has gained popularity in various fields in education. Living Theory is a concept that refers to an individual’s constantly evolving understanding of the world and themselves (Whitehead, 2009). It involves continually learning from experiences and using that knowledge to shape beliefs, values, and action (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). The idea is to actively seek personal growth and transformation while also making a positive impact on the community and society at large (Shrestha, 2021). This concept is similar to the notion of Transformative Learning Theory, in that it seeks to have an ongoing dynamic understanding of a person’s transformation that evolves based on personal experiences, reflections, and actions (Tisdell, 2020). Thus, the concept of the Living Theory of Transformative Learning is the idea that transformative learning is a lifelong process that individuals actively engage in throughout their lives. And it recognizes that as we learn and grow, our understanding and perspective on transformation through Transformative Learning may alter and develop, leading to newer insights and theories.

### **4. How do you perceive the “deep change” that Transformative Learning can bring about?**

Transformative Learning Theory focuses on bringing about deep change of individuals’ existing beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives through critical reflection and self-examination, inviting people to question and reevaluate their values, attitudes, and behaviors (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2000). When individuals start examining and questioning their existing beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives, they have to go through a process of “unlearning.” It allows individuals to develop new ways of thinking and actions that align with their true selves and promotes personal growth and transformation. However, this process of unlearning is often difficult for some individuals since it can only happen when individuals are willing to accept or make

themselves open to see and understand other beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives. Without their willingness and openness to unlearning, deep changes and transformations in learning will not occur. The process of unlearning can create space for new perspectives, ideas, and possibilities and lead a profound shift in how practitioners perceive themselves, others, and the world, and it can lead to greater empathy, understanding and openness to alternative viewpoints. Through deep change, Transformative Learning enables individuals to develop a greater sense of self-awareness and self-discovery and reach and transcend horizons of knowledge, and become more intentional and purposeful in their lives.

##### **5. What would you propose to enhance the progress of “living theory of TL”?**

Living Theory of Transformative Learning is innovative and revolutionary. Any theory should evolve and constantly develop through continuous scholarship and practice. To enhance the progress of “Living Theory of Transformative Learning,” I would propose the following key elements.

First, to enhance the progress of the Living Theory of Transformative Learning, it is important for educators and scholars to encourage practicing self-reflection in educational contexts including formal and informal education and workplace training. Learners should be encouraged to reflect on their own personal life experiences and actions to understand how they have become who they are today and see how they have grown and transformed because of their life experiences. This type of self-reflection can help them understand their own life histories and transformative learning process.

Second, in order to enhance the progress of the Living Theory of Transformative Learning, it is crucial to develop and foster a supportive learning community and network that embraces diverse perspectives. Developing a supportive learning community and network where individuals can share their life experiences without resistance or hesitation can enhance the progress of the Living Theory of Transformative Learning. Transformative Learning Theory has been utilized in various contexts not only in academia but also outside of academia. So, it is crucial to

recognize and embrace diverse perspectives. By engaging with different viewpoints and experiences, individuals can expand their understanding and challenge their preconceived notions, leading to further growth and development. The community and network can facilitate future development and connections and can contribute to developing and refining Transformative Learning Theory.

Last, it is important to think about how Transformative Learning can be used in ongoing research and how it can be applied in various contexts. In any academic field, creating knowledge through scholarship and disseminating it to individuals in the field and society are key tasks for the field to grow and survive. So, Transformative Learning scholars also think about how they can contribute to those key tasks inside and outside of the field of Transformative Learning. In addition, having a clear understanding and identity of the applicability of the theory will be essential. This involves implementation of transformative learning approaches in various contexts such as education, workplace, and personal development programs to see how those approaches are applicable to those individuals in those contexts. By doing so, we can refine approaches and theory itself to make them more applicable, effective, and impactful.

#### **6. What is the position of Mezirow's "Transformation Theory", as well as other theoretical perspectives, within this process?**

Based on the relevant literature, Transformation Theory is the theory of a learning process by which the individual moves from an unexamined way of thinking to a more examined and critically reflective way. It focuses on how individuals can undergo a profound shift in their perspectives, beliefs, and ways of thinking through critical reflection and self-examination (Mezirow, 2000). This theory emphasizes the importance of challenging assumptions, looking for alternative viewpoints, and integrating new insights into one's worldview. Both Living Theory and Mezirow's Transformation Theory address changes in one's perspectives through critical self reflection. Both theories intersect in many ways and are mutually inclusive and could be used in place of the other in the process of transformative learning.

Other theoretical perspectives that are relevant to this process include change theory, which focuses on making changes not only in individuals but also in organizations and communities from critical assessments through action learning processes, from identification of issues to plans of action to change, and from implementation of the changes to evaluation of the changes. Also, constructivism fits in here in that it focuses on the active construction of knowledge and understanding through lived experiences. There is also Social Cognitive Theory, which explores how individuals learn from observing others in social contexts and through self-efficacy beliefs.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This article explored Transformative Learning Theory and the field of Transformative Learning through Living Theory by responding to six key questions. Transformative Learning Theory has been utilized to understand how individuals examine and transform their own beliefs and assumptions through self-reflection. These individual acts also impact the larger community and society, helping people to be more critical and innovative. This increase in popularity of the theory has led to its growth and expansion. Transformative Learning Theory may be used in different theoretical perspectives to contribute to our understanding of transformative learning by highlighting various factors and processes involved in personal growth, cognitive development, and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. By considering these perspectives, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals undergo transformative experiences and navigate their learning journeys.

In conclusion, transformative learning has immense potential for personal and societal growth as the Living Theory of Transformative Learning. As the field of Transformative Learning grows and expands, it is crucial for the field to understand how to capture the essence of Transformative Learning Theory in various ways in different contexts. By promoting the benefits of such critical reflection, we can inspire others to embrace this powerful theory for positive change and create a more democratic and inclusive world.

## ANNEX

### Invitation to participate in the “*Transformative Learning Future Orientations Study*”

Dear colleagues,

We are reaching out to you as the editors of the journal *Adult Education: Critical Issues* (AECI) to invite you to participate in the Transformative Learning Future Orientations Study. The next issue of AECI will be dedicated to this.

The community of transformative learning scholars has highlighted the theoretical exploration as a "theory in progress", consisting of a continuous development and elaboration of the perspectives it includes. Some of these perspectives converge and others diverge from each other. A discussion began in 2000s by Baumgartner, Caffarella, Cranton, Gunnlaugson, Merriam, Mezirow, Taylor and, recently, by Eschenbacher, Finnegan, Fleming, Higgins, Hoggan, Hoggan-Kloubert, Kasl, Kokkos, Nicolaidis, and others. However, until today, an initiative has not been undertaken to compile the views of all the key persons in the field.

Although there is a general agreement among the scholars of Transformative Learning (TL) that its defining characteristic is the aim of deep transformation, and that the related theoretical views constitute a living theory, there has not been a thorough collective discussion about how these concepts are understood. Therefore, it would be useful to explore the perspectives of scholars, to see how the orientations of the theoretical field of TL are shaped in contemporary social, cultural, political, and educational contexts.

Thus, we took the initiative to launch an open, exploratory dialogue, to exchange the views on the above key issues. After all, this is the main purpose of our journal<sup>3</sup>, which focuses on issues such as:

- redefining or critically assessing problematic theories, theoretical approaches or social phenomena;
- questioning beliefs or practices that are taken for granted;
- exploring a variety of different, alternative, controversial or opposing views;
- exploration of misunderstood or underestimated considerations that are nevertheless interesting and provocative.

Our initiative is addressed to the members of ITLA community who have an institutional role within it: ITLA's Mission Circle and Leadership Circle, the editors of the *Journal of Transformative Education*, the reviewers of *Jack Mezirow Living Theory*

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<sup>3</sup> Members of the Scientific Committee of the journal include thinkers from the international Transformative Learning and Adult Education communities, such as Loretta Fabri, Monica Fedeli, Ted Fleming, Fergal Finnegan, Chad Hoggan, Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert, Timothy Ireland, Elisabeth Kasl, Randee Lawrence, Peter Mayo, Victoria Marsick, Aliko Nicolaidis, Katarina Popovic, Maura Striano, Kathleen Taylor, and Marguerite Welsh, as well as all key Greek thinkers in the field.



of *Transformative Learning Award* and *Patricia Cranton Distinguished Transformative Learning Dissertation Award*, the Conveners of the ESREA's *Transformative & Emancipatory Adult Education* network, and the representatives of the organizations affiliated with ITLA, the Italian Transformative Learning Network, and the Hellenic Adult Education Association.

This open, reflective dialogue will be hosted in the 5<sup>th</sup> issue of AECI journal in January 2024.

The questions around which we propose to revolve this dialogue and the considerations to be presented, are:

1. What are the elements that constitute the identity of the theoretical field of Transformative Learning?
2. What supports and what hinders the formation and development of this field?
3. How do you understand the concept of "living theory of TL"?
4. How do you perceive the "deep change" that Transformative Learning can bring about?
5. What would you propose to enhance the progress of living theory of TL?
6. What is the position of Mezirow's "Transformation Theory", as well as other theoretical perspectives, within this process?

We invite you to share your perspective on the above questions by sending a **1500-2000 word essay by 15 December 2024** following the guidelines in <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/aeci/information/authors>.

Your essay should follow a **simplified structure**:

- *Title (of manuscript)*
- *Name + Affiliation of the writer*
- *Short Introduction*
- *Body of your views, making sure you clearly answer the 6 questions set above (please use the numbers of the questions as we send them)*
- *Concluding thoughts*
- *References are not mandatory*

Your contribution is highly valuable, due to your significant expertise in Transformative Learning. It will be an honor for our journal to host your viewpoint.

Best regards,

The Editorial Team of AECI

Alexis Kokkos (Hellenic Open University), Editor-in-Chief

Dimitris Vergidis (University of Patras), Consulting Editor

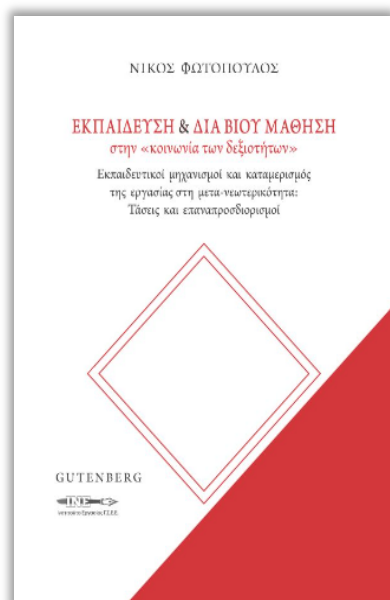
Thanasis Karalis (University of Patras) & Katerina Kedraka (Democritus University of Thrace), Editors

Natassa Raikou (University of Thessaly), Review Editor

## Χρήστος Γούλας

Γενικός Διευθυντής Ινστιτούτου Εργασίας της ΓΣΕΕ

Λέκτορας του Πανεπιστημίου Neapolis Pafos, Cyprus



**Νίκος Φωτόπουλος (2023). «Εκπαίδευση και Διά βίου Μάθηση στην «Κοινωνία των Δεξιοτήτων»: εκπαιδευτικοί μηχανισμοί και καταμερισμός της εργασίας στη μετα-νεωτερικότητα: τάσεις και μετασχηματισμοί», Εκδόσεις: Gutenberg-INE/ΓΣΕΕ**

Το βιβλίο του Νίκου Φωτόπουλου, Αναπληρωτή Καθηγητή Κοινωνιολογίας στο Τμήμα Κοινωνικής και Εκπαιδευτικής του Πανεπιστημίου Πελοποννήσου, αποτελεί μια ουσιαστική τομή στο πεδίο της κριτικής κοινωνιολογίας της εκπαίδευσης και της εκπαιδευτικής πολιτικής η οποία έρχεται να προτείνει μια συνεκτική συνολική ανάγνωση των σχέσεων μεταξύ εργασίας και γνώσης, παραγωγής και μάθησης, εντάσσοντάς τες σε ένα προσδιορισμένο και αναγνώσιμο ιστορικό συνεχές. Κι αυτό γιατί, ειδικότερα στις μέρες μας, έχουμε μεγάλη ανάγκη τόσο από διαλεκτικές συνθέσεις στο πεδίο του επιστημονικού διαλόγου όσο και από κριτικές αναπλαισιώσεις των μεγάλων θεωρητικών αφηγήσεων, στοιχεία που συγκροτούν και χαρακτηρίζουν την έρευνα του Ν. Φωτόπουλου σε όλο της το εύρος.

Ιδιαίτερα την περίοδο που διανύουμε οφείλουμε να διεκδικήσουμε αλλά και να αναπτύξουμε με μεγαλύτερο σθένος έναν θεωρητικό λόγο για την εκπαίδευση και τη Δια

βίου Μάθηση ο οποίος να μην υποκαθιστά τα εμπειρικά δεδομένα, αλλά αντίθετα να εγγυάται την εσωτερική τους συνοχή και εγκυρότητα και, κυρίως να μην συμβιβάζεται με μια εννοιολογικά ισχνή και μονομερώς εμπειριοκρατική προσέγγιση στην κοινωνική έρευνα. Για αυτούς τους λόγους και πριν οτιδήποτε άλλο αναφερθεί, θέλω να επισημάνω που η ερευνητική δουλειά του Φωτόπουλου μοιάζει να μάς επανασυνδέει με μεγάλα κοινωνικά ζητήματα και με δύσκολες ιστορικές απαντήσεις, ωθώντας μας σε έναν κριτικό αναστοχασμό που συχνά μπορεί και να αποδεικνύεται ιδιαίτερα επίπονος.

Το βιβλίο του Φωτόπουλου είναι «Δύσκολο». Όχι από την άποψη της επιλογής των εκφραστικών μέσων ή της συντακτικής δομής. Το αντίθετο αφού, εντυπωσιαζόμαστε και από την σαφήνεια του λόγου αλλά και από την περίτεχνη απλότητα της οργάνωσης του κειμένου. «Δύσκολο», από την άποψη του ότι το περιεχόμενό του δεν προσφέρεται για γρήγορες διαγώνιες αναγνώσεις και ούτε εφαρμόζει πρακτικές εξοικονόμησης στην ανάλυση των εννοιών και του θεωρητικού λόγου. «Δύσκολο» όμως και για έναν παραπάνω λόγο: γιατί δεν παρακάμπτει τις εννοιολογικές αντιθέσεις, τις εσωτερικές αντιφάσεις αλλά και τους διαλεκτικούς συσχετισμούς στην ιστορική τους διάσταση, που ενέπνευσαν την κριτική θεώρηση των εκπαιδευτικών φαινομένων τους τελευταίους δύο αιώνες: την εκπαίδευση ως κυρίαρχο ιδεολογικό μηχανισμό αναπαραγωγής αλλά και ως διεργασία άμβλυνσης των ανισοτήτων, την τυπική σχολική γνώση ως κυρίαρχο πολιτισμικό κώδικα αλλά και ως εργαλείο κοινωνικής συμπερίληψης.

Διαβάζοντας κριτικά αλλά και εμπριθώς το εν λόγω βιβλίο θα ήθελα να επισημάνω 3 σημαντικές «οριζόντιες διαστάσεις» οι οποίες στη δική μου θεώρηση, αποτελούν στοιχεία πρωτότυπης συμβολής στην υπάρχουσα γνώση και εμπειρία.

**α)** Η πρώτη διάσταση που θα ήθελα να επισημάνω είναι αυτή της παρτίδας ενός εννοιολογικού παιχνιδιού που παραπέμπει στο σκάκι, παρτίδα που μοιάζει να οργανώνει ο Νίκος Φωτόπουλος σε όλο το βιβλίο. Οι κανόνες της παρτίδας είναι απλοί: καμιά έννοια δεν μπορεί να κινητοποιηθεί χωρίς το προηγούμενο και επιστάμενο «έλεγχο» των ιστορικών και θεωρητικών της καταβολών. Για παράδειγμα δεν αρκεί μια απλή γενική επίκληση της έννοιας της μετανεωτερικότητας προκειμένου να τοποθετηθούν αυτόματα στην ιστορική τους σειρά οι πολύπλευρες διεργασίες ανάδυσης του πεδίου της «δια βίου μάθησης». Η μετανεωτερικότητα αν όντως αποτελεί προϊόν ιστορικής μετάβασης και σύνθετου κοινωνικού μετασχηματισμού, είναι αναγκαίο να ιδωθεί μέσα από το προηγούμενο έλεγχο των όρων και των ορίων που συγκροτούν την ίδια την νεωτερικότητα ως έννοια. Κατά τρόπο ανάλογο, η 4<sup>η</sup> βιομηχανική επανάσταση, θα ήταν όρος κενός νοήματος αν δεν επιστρέφαμε

πρώτα στην εξέταση των συνθηκών που μετέτρεψαν την απλή εκμηχάνιση της παραγωγής τον 19<sup>ο</sup> αιώνα, από τεχνολογική τάση, σε επανάσταση με κοινωνικό και οικονομικό αλλά και πολιτισμικό περιεχόμενο. Παρομοίως, αν επικαλούμαστε τους ιστορικούς μετασχηματισμούς των εκπαιδευτικών συστημάτων. Να αναλογιστούμε, για παράδειγμα, την περίπλοκη σχέση μεταξύ εκπαίδευσης, εργασίας και επαγγελματικής κατάρτισης, η οποία δεν υπήρξε ποτέ μονοδιάστατη, συνεχής και προβλέψιμη και η οποία, περισσότερο και συχνότερα, οριοθετούσε ένα πεδίο κοινωνικών ανταγωνισμών και αντιθετικών διεκδικήσεων, παρά μια συστημικά οργανωμένη και ρυθμισμένη σχέση. Σε όλα τα παραπάνω παραδείγματα, κάθε φορά που επιχειρούμε να ανασύρουμε με ευκολία ένα κλασικό εννοιολογικό πασπαρτού, ο Νίκος Φωτόπουλος ως «άλλος» έμπειρος σκακιστής-δάσκαλος μας ζητά να παραιτηθούμε από την ευκολία μας και να παίξουμε το κομμάτι που αγγίξαμε μέχρι τέλους, εκτιθέμενοι στο σύνολο των επιπτώσεων που φέρει η κάθε θεωρητική επιλογή. Υπό την έννοια αυτή, η χρήση και η αξιοποίηση κάθε εννοιολογικού προσδιορισμού τεκμηριώνεται σε σοβαρά αλλά και ισχυρά μεθοδολογικά αλλά και θεωρητικά θεμέλια.

**β)** Η δεύτερη διάσταση που απαιτείται να αναδειχθεί είναι αυτή της δημιουργικής κριτικής στην σύγχρονη πολιτική οικονομία της δια βίου μάθησης ή την σύγχρονη πολιτική οικονομία των δεξιοτήτων. Ο συγγραφέας στο μεγαλύτερο μέρος του βιβλίου επιδίδεται σε μια συστηματική προσπάθεια επανασυνάρμωσης των σχέσεων παραγωγής και αναπαραγωγής που θα μπορούσαν να χαρακτηρίζουν μια σύγχρονη εκδοχή του καπιταλιστικού τρόπου παραγωγής σε σχέση με την εκπαίδευση. Και εδώ να σημειώσω ότι η σταδιακή ιστορική ανάδυση ενός ενιαίου πεδίου για την δια βίου μάθηση που να συμπεριλαμβάνει τόσο την τυπική, όσο και την μη τυπική εκπαίδευση αλλά και την άτυπη μάθηση, μοιάζει να ολοκληρώνεται ερήμην μιας τέτοιας αναγκαίας συνολικής θεώρησης. Έτσι βρισκόμαστε αντιμέτωποι με μια σχετική αμηχανία ως προς τα εργαλεία που χρησιμοποιούμε για την κριτική απέναντι στην ίδια την έννοια της δια βίου μάθησης, μιας και τα περισσότερα από αυτά είναι προσαρμοσμένα και σταθμισμένα για την ανάλυση των τυπικών εκπαιδευτικών συστημάτων ενσωματώνοντας δύσκολα τη διάσταση της μη τυπικής εκπαίδευσης και άτυπης μάθησης. Με τα καθιερωμένα εργαλεία ίσως να καταφέρνουμε να αναλύσουμε διακριτά και με επάρκεια τα τυπικά εκπαιδευτικά συστήματα, αλλά ακόμη δυσκολευόμαστε με την μη τυπική εκπαίδευση και την επαγγελματική κατάρτιση. Μας λείπει η συλλογική και συνολική σύλληψη των δυναμικών σχέσεων που διαμορφώνουν ένα ενιαίο πεδίο για τη δια βίου μάθηση. Κατά συνέπεια η δεύτερη σημαντική συμβολή του βιβλίου λοιπόν είναι ότι ανασυστήνει μια τέτοια πολιτική οικονομία, προκειμένου να την καταστήσει στη συνέχεια αντικείμενο αναλυτικής κριτικής. Οι αναφορές στον καταμερισμό

εργασίας και στους τρόπους οργάνωσης της παραγωγής, η επιμέτρηση των συνεπειών της παγκοσμιοποίησης και η προβληματική των νέων «κοινωνικών συμβολαίων» στην μετάβαση προς την 4<sup>η</sup> βιομηχανική επανάσταση, αποτελούν κάποια από τα επιμέρους συστατικά αυτής της «κρυφής πολιτικής οικονομίας» της δια βίου μάθησης η οποία καθορίζει σε μεγάλο βαθμό τις κοινωνικές σχέσεις παραγωγής και αναπαραγωγής στην μετα-νεωτερικότητα. Επί της ουσίας ο συγγραφέας μας τονίζει με πολλούς τρόπους ότι αν δεν καταφέρουμε να διαμορφώσουμε τους όρους της συνολικής πρόσληψης αυτών των σχέσεων, δεν θα μπορέσουμε ποτέ να ασκήσουμε συνεπή κριτική στους πολιτικούς και κοινωνικούς όρους συγκρότησής τους, αλλά ούτε και στις δημόσιες πολιτικές που αυτές θεμελιώνουν.

**γ)** Η τρίτη οριζόντια διάσταση που θα επισημάνω - ενδεχομένως και ως την πιο επιδραστική - είναι αυτή της θεωρητικής συνεκδοχής μεταξύ εκπαιδευτικών πολιτικών και εκπαιδευτικών πρακτικών. Ειδικότερα, στο πεδίο της δια βίου μάθησης, δεν έχουμε συνηθίσει να αναλύουμε με τρόπο διαυγή και αναλυτικό τις εντατικές συνδέσεις ανάμεσα στο μακροεπίπεδο των εκπαιδευτικών πολιτικών και το μικροεπίπεδο των εκπαιδευτικών πρακτικών. Το σύννηθος είναι η μια κατηγορία απλά να υπονοεί την ύπαρξη της άλλης και να διατηρούνται σαφή και ξεκάθαρα τα όρια ανάμεσα στις δυο κατηγορίες. Το πρόβλημα προκύπτει όταν μια νέα κατηγορία έρχεται να διεμβολίσει συγχρόνως και τα δυο επιμέρους πεδία τόσο των εκπαιδευτικών πολιτικών όσο και των πρακτικών, δυσκολεύοντας έτσι την κριτική τους ανάλυση. Νομίζω πως μια τέτοια περίπτωση είναι η έννοια των «δεξιοτήτων». Από την μια πρόκειται για κατηγορία πρακτικής περιγραφής «μαθησιακών αποτελεσμάτων» η οποία λειτουργεί στο πεδίο της καθημερινής εκπαιδευτικής πρακτικής, από την άλλη όμως, εμφανίζεται και ως η ελάχιστη νοηματοδοτημένη μονάδα δόμησης των μαθησιακών περιεχομένων, διάσταση που την εντάσσει και στο πεδίο των εκπαιδευτικών πολιτικών.

Θεωρώ ότι αυτό ακριβώς είναι και το ειδοποιό εννοιολογικό χαρακτηριστικό που καθορίζει και τη δυναμική της έννοιας των «δεξιοτήτων». Θεωρώ η έννοια των δεξιοτήτων είναι αυτή η οποία μας επιτρέπει στην πραγματικότητα να διασυνδέουμε τις επιμέρους περιοχές του πεδίου της δια βίου εκπαίδευσης, τυπικής, μη τυπικής και άτυπης, κωδικοποιώντας με έναν κοινό και συμβατό τρόπο την μαθησιακή εμπειρία. Από αυτή την άποψη θεωρώ ότι οι δεξιότητες είναι ένα όχημα μεταφοράς της κοινωνικής εμπειρίας και διακίνησης της κοινωνικής μαθησιακής εμπειρίας μεταξύ εκπαιδευτικών συστημάτων και συστημάτων μη τυπικής εκπαίδευσης καθώς και άτυπης μάθησης. Ωστόσο, είναι αλήθεια ότι συχνότερα βρισκόμαστε αντιμέτωποι με θεωρήσεις που προκρίνουν περισσότερο λογικές αντιπαράθεσης παρά διασύνδεσης, με κλασικότερη αυτή την αντίθεση μεταξύ γνώσεων και δεξιοτήτων.

Ο Νίκος Φωτόπουλος στην κοινωνιολογική του συλλογιστική, αντιμετωπίζει κριτικά και διαλεκτικά το ζήτημα των δεξιοτήτων θεωρώντας ότι το «μικρό» των εκπαιδευτικών πρακτικών και το «μεγάλο» των εκπαιδευτικών πολιτικών, όχι μόνο μπορούν αλλά οφείλουν να αναλυθούν από κοινού και συγχρόνως. Χαρακτηριστικότερο, δε, παράδειγμα εφαρμογής αυτής της λογικής είναι τα όσα ο συγγραφέας αναπτύσσει γύρω από την πρόσληψη της έννοιας των «μαθησιακών αποτελεσμάτων» αλλά και τις αμφισημίες που αυτή εμπεριέχει. Έτσι, αντί της εύκολης και ίσως απλοϊκής αντιπαράθεσης μεταξύ γνώσεων και δεξιοτήτων, μας προτείνει μια συγκροτημένη κριτική ανάλυση των πολιτικών, αλλά και πρακτικών σχέσεων που τις συνδέουν μεταξύ τους, αλλά και των «συνεπειών» που αυτές ενδέχεται να επιφέρουν αν δεν ληφθούν υπόψη μιας σειρά από αναγκαίες και επιβεβλημένες «διαμεσολαβήσεις».

Κατά την προσωπική μου κρίση, θεωρώ πως έχουμε στα χέρια το πρώτο μέρος ενός συνολικότερου έργου για τη γνώση, την οικονομία της και τις κοινωνικές σχέσεις παραγωγής της, στις σύνθετες και περίπλοκες εποχές που ανοίγονται μπροστά μας. Ένα έργο που θα είχε ενδιαφέρον να διεισδύσει με την ίδια κριτική αναλυτική διάθεση και σε έννοιες οι οποίες δεν εντοπίζονται ακόμη εύκολα στο γεμάτο πρακτικότητες πεδίο της δια βίου μάθησης. Έννοιες όπως της ισότητας, της εξουσίας, της ιδεολογικής ηγεμονίας, του κοινωνικού ανταγωνισμού, των αντιστοιχιών και αναντιστοιχιών κ.α. Υπό την έννοια αυτή περιμένουμε ακόμα περισσότερα από τον ακαδημαϊκό δάσκαλο, ερευνητή και συγγραφέα Νίκο Φωτόπουλο, αφού εκτός του ότι αναμόχλευσε κρίσιμα ζητήματα στο πεδίο της εκπαίδευσης και της δια βίου μάθησης, επαναπροσδιόρισε τους όρους μιας εξαιρετικά επιδραστικής δυναμικής στον επιστημονικό, εκπαιδευτικό και κοινωνικό στοχασμό.