Using Transformative Learning Theory to Achieve Sustainability in Education and Business: An Interview with Janette Brunstein

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This editorial interview was conducted with Dr. Janette Brunstein, who researches sustainability and transformative learning in the master and doctoral program in Business Administration at Mackenzie Presbyterian University in São Paulo, Brazil. At the time this interview was conducted, she was a visiting fellow in the Center for Excellence in Transformative Teaching and Learning at the University of Central Oklahoma. She was interviewed by editorial research assistants, Andi Ullrich and Jacie Harvel.

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Jacie: *Well, first, thank you so much for the opportunity to interview you. We're excited to dig deeper into your research*!

Andi: *Yes! We'd like to start by asking you when you realized that the transformative learning theory was a good theory to use for your research?*

Janette: I have been researching sustainability in business through education, learning processes, and the development of competencies. I have been studying this in two environments: in the academic environment—how we can create the transformative learning mindset as professors in the classroom—and in organizations for people who are already in the workplace. Sustainability calls for paradigmatic change because you need to see the goals of the organization that are not solely for profit. You have to think about environmental, social, cultural, and territorial issues, too. This is very controversial and problematic since businesses seem to currently focus on results, productivity, and growth. But, just how sustainable is it to grow a business solely with profit as the end goal? One must think of other environments, not just the profit of the owner of the company. You have to put effort and money in things that aren't just for profit or profitable. You have to invest in social and environmental issues as well. To achieve the kind of transformation that redefines an organization's values and main

objectives, you need the transformative learning process, because this is the process that leads us toward this new perspective.

I had to come back to Paulo Freire's (1970) work and the idea that we need to go through critical transitivity. We needed to direct students to think about the social and political responsibilities of students, of management, and the managers themselves. What is critical transformativity? Freire (1970) describes it as the ability to think globally and critically about the present condition, and decide to change. Transformative learning helps people to think about their condition and how to change their condition critically. It demands that people place the most effort into thinking about the origin of a problem—the root of the problem—instead of just fixing it in the moment. This is called problem-posing. To achieve this, when you are questioning, you need to ask *why*. What is behind social responsibility? How are we going to address these issues in the company?

Andi: *Have you had experience with transformative learning before? Did you find out about it during your research?*

Janette: My background is in education, and transformation is part of educational discourse, so as educators, we are always worried about the transformation of our students. This is the main goal of education.

Transformative learning became more significant when I started to combine education and business toward sustainability because I needed a way to make a paradigmatic change. It became very important to go deep into transformative learning, because you need its practical process in schools, organizations, and education. In universities, educators have to foster transformative learning, but you need to make the educator first go through the transformative learning so they can foster it in students. For me, the whole process has a lot of mediums: students, faculty, staff, boards of organizations. And it goes beyond the organization or university, to the educational system encouraged by the government, the policies, the direction that education is thinking in a certain place, culture, country. When we talk about transformative learning, we are talking, not only about the individual, but everything involved in the education system.

Jacie: *Alright! Now let's discuss your personal program of research. What made you care about sustainability in business?*

Janette: Sustainability in education is just one of my areas of research. I like to first think about professors; how can the professor foster critical reflection through transformative learning in order to teach sustainability in the business classroom? Fostering critical reflection is not easy, as I mentioned earlier. You have to believe that there are other important goals for a business besides profit. But how are you going to ask the businessperson to not grow the business? How are you going to ask the businessperson to put money in things beyond profit? It's hard. There's paradoxes and contradictions. But I'm trying to understand how the professors in Brazil have been doing this. I've found that the professors are trying to make students reflect, but how are they doing

this? The professors are focused on the companies and their actions. The companies hug a tree, but they don't hug an employee? These professors are worried about the company's actions. Personally, I'm worrying about being an example myself. If my behavior isn't sustainable in the classroom, how will I teach this? If I am able to make students calculate the consequences of their individual actions, they will be able to make a lot of similar calculations when they are in the business place about the consequences of their actions. So, companies are the first point in the critical reflection. Beyond companies, educators are making students think about what is the responsibility of the management theories in building sustainable behavior. Because, year by year, the books, scholarly papers, discussions in congress—everything is made to teach people how to become wealthier, how to produce more, how people can consume more without thinking about the environmental and social consequences.

Beyond this, professors are trying to erase the consciousness of the students. In what ways do you practice consciousness where you live? What does a sustainable business look like? What kind of business peaks in a sustainable society? These questions should be asked because there are a lot of businesses that are good for the business itself but not as good for the common good. Then, to what extent will we accept a business that is just good for itself?

The last point I'd like to discuss is the role of the managers. The professors are asking the students what the role of the managers is: to make profit? No, that's not the only role of the managers.

In summary, my research has five points:
1) The impact of a company's actions
2) Consciousness raising
3) The role of the manager
4) The responsibility of the management theories
5) To make students realize the interest in power-relations that are behind managers' actions.

My research has been searching for the professors who are making the business students question and think critically, resulting in a transformation of their conceptions. The second part of the research I'm doing follows *how* these students are being transformed. We are measuring the experiences of learning quantitatively, and evaluating them qualitively to see if we've built a more transformative learning experience in the classroom. How much are these students are being transformed from the beginning of the course to the end of the course?

Andi: *Is there one piece of practical advice you would give educators in order to transform the professors in the best way?*

Janette: Go back to the beginning. When I say the "theories" of management should teach students how to make a profit and how to be self-successful, I am only focusing on the individual needs and achievements, not the collective. Some professors are now questioning this, and pointing out that such ideas were formed during a certain point in history. They were built with a certain kind of mindset that can be transformed, and we can think about another kind of business. So the most practical advice I could give is

that you have to teach your students how to change the "taking for granted" mindset. Business was always made to make profit and nothing else. Now, though, we can build a different way. We are educating managers in the same way. If educators don't change it, we don't change the students, we don't change the generation, it will not have an impact in the environment as a whole. So, I think the most important advice is how to change the "taking for granted" mindset.

Jacie: *So you mentioned the educator modeling transformation. How much do you think it's the professor's responsibility verses the student's?*

Janette: The question is, you cannot transform other people, but it's up to you to be open to transformation. But there's still something educators can do. We can create an environment that makes you think, makes you create new ideas, makes you go further and get rid of this "taking for granted" mindset in order to think differently. You can create this environment, and this is our main goal. How can we create a good environment to foster transformative learning?

As educators and managers, what I can do is help create the best experience students go through, because what is most important is this experience students have during their time in education. You have four years to provide them with the best experiences in order to transform them and encourage them to be open-minded, and think about the common good rather than solely the individual good. It's the responsibility of the students, of course, but I believe educators have a huge responsibility themselves.

Andi: *Okay, so how do you implement sustainable education in your life and in your position as a researcher?*

Janette: I try to make my life more sustainable at home. I try to make the way I educate my son more sustainable and the way I live in this world. And, I try to see my own contradictions, because when you look to personal experience, it's hard, because it should lead me to not use my car and not buy so much. And it's not easy. But, this is the way it is. It's not easy, and it is full of contradiction. But beyond the contradiction, I'm trying to improve and think about how my life can be more sustainable. The reason people's work is unsustainable now, and sometimes the pressure we live with, results in unsustainable choices, and sometimes I can't avoid that. But, what can I do, at least, is reflect on my choices in order to change.

I, along with the professors working alongside me, are trying to make students go through this construction process to create something new. For instance, we have been measuring strategic management discipline. You start with the classical definition and classical way approach model of strategic management—competition-oriented, profit-oriented, and completion dynamics, etc.—and piece by piece, you are showing the students that it is not that simple. You say to them, "I know you are used to this theory, but now we have to think about the environment, society development, and economic rationality. And sometimes the students got very lost in the process. They may react something like, "Oh my gosh! I was taught I had to work just for profit, and you are saying no." You have to incorporate organizational complexity, tensions,

contradictions, and paradoxes. And now that we have discussed these contradictions and paradoxes, what can we do? We tried to reconstruct it. We can think not just in competition, but in cooperation. Competition and cooperation—co-petition—a new word! In organizational sustainability, one has to ask, "Oh, how can I do this?" They have to think in stakeholder theory; they have to think in cooperate social responsibility. Educators have to give tools to the students and think about everything that makes from another perspective. It's a trajectory; I have to deconstruct and reconstruct. I have to think this theory and go further and complicate it a little bit, and think of other issues, too. We are trying to implement this in various courses. And, personally, I'm trying to involve my graduate students from master and doctorate programs to engage in research about transformative learning for sustainability in business and in the business school environment: researching, discussing what literature has said about this, watching lectures, video analysis, and everything that helps us to question the unsustainable world and the responsibility of managers in it.

Jacie: *So, outside of academia, how do you believe organizations and professionals should practice transformative learning, and do you see a value in that?*

Janette: I think the organizational world is very tough; there's not enough space to reflect. And there are a lot of rules and a lot of processes—you try to control, control people, control time, and control other things. I think we need to create space to reflect. When you create space to reflect, you allow new beginnings. And transformative learning is about new beginnings—the opportunity to start something new, to think new, to act new, to develop another role in society. Should the organization create that space? People in organizations fear saying what they think because they feel more pressure. They could be fired. There are a lot of consequences, and people are not always interested in change. So, there is a lot of tension and pressure that tries to make business go on as it is. And even when there are efforts to transform it, it doesn't necessarily mean critical transformation. Sometimes it means instrumental transformation where you do something better, but you don't do things differently—this is the paradigmatic shift that we need, especially when talking about transformative learning. Even when you create spaces in the organization to reflect, it's a very controlled space because the organization can't take the transformation so far out of the control. So, there is a lot of tension in an organization, much more than in the university, because in the academic environment, you tend to have more free discussion. There is not as much play, so you don't lose much, but I think if we don't start making space for people to question things and construct new beginnings, we will not foster anything new.

Andi: *What do you think the future holds for transformative learning?*

Janette: I think we are going to see more of the interdisciplinary approach to transformative learning because it's so hard to understand what makes students, or people in general, transform. You could see it through the lens of philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, or education, and you need all these combinations/fields to try to understand what makes people transform. And I see more integrative and interdisciplinary studies. It is not easy to build. Second (I've been working in this area now), I wish the

transformation theory would go toward the direction of thinking, not only about individual transformation, but about collective transformation. I'm not just concerned with how individuals can transform, but how we can face collective dilemmas to transform and address social issues. The third thing, I'm seeing transformative learning put effort in is building tools or instruments to help us evaluate transformative learning, because the qualitative way we are evaluating is not always enough. And the quantitative way we are measuring, even less. So, I think in the future, these discussions will have more strengths: evaluation, collective dilemmas, and interdisciplinary approaches.

Jacie: *I believe we are at the end!*

Andi: *Is there anything else you would like to add?*

Janette: I would like to mention one thing I've been studying recently. I think it further addresses the question you asked me, about how to foster transformative learning. I forgot to mention that we have to organize based on Vincent's and Reynold's theory about organization and reflection (2009). There is a need for transformative learning through the organization of reflection in education. But, how do we create an environment that fosters reflection? It's not just about what professors do; it's about how I do it organizationally—how I create process, spaces of reflection, discussion, an exchanging of experiences between professors and between students, what worked and what didn't. I think there's an organizational subject that hasn't been considered enough. I also think there's a learning curve for the universities to transform themselves, and think how, organizationally, they are able to foster reflection—from the staff, to the students, to the environment beyond.

Andi: *Well, I think that is the end of it. Thank you!*

Jacie: *Yes, thank you!*

References

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