



JOURNAL OF
TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

The Ecology of Transformative Learning: Transdisciplinary Provocations

Author(s): Elizabeth A. Lange

Source: Lange, E. A. (2015). The ecology of transformative learning: Transdisciplinary Provocations. *Journal of Transformative Learning*, 3(1), 28-34.

Published by: University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond: OK

URL: jotl.uco.edu

The *Journal of Transformative Learning* is an Open Access Journal at jotl.uco.edu.
The *Journal* is dedicated to the application and practice of transformation in higher education.

The ecology of transformative learning: Transdisciplinary provocations

ELIZABETH A. LANGE¹
St. Francis Xavier University

We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not.

*Heraclitis
...the Dark Philosopher of Ancient Greece*

Moreover, we step into and out of the river as different beings.

*Tim Rayner
...contemporary change theorist*

In pondering the human condition, political theorist Hannah Arendt (1958) asserts that all humans are conditioned beings. Yet,

the conditions of human existence—life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth—can never ‘explain’ what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely. (p. 11)

It is in this space between conditioning and the larger possibilities for our self, including our collective self as society that the dynamics of transformation come into play. It is in this space that we can shake off conventional parameters and pull aside the veil of culturally constructed thought-constructs and frames of seeing reality, even momentarily. The broad fascination with transformation and the desire of educators to create conditions for transformative learning have resulted in this educational activity becoming the most researched aspect of adult education over the last forty years (Taylor, 2008). In this short essay, the intention is to profile how current thinking about transformative learning emerged out of a specific epistemological orientation and to comment on opportune directions for research and pedagogy in the academy, particularly with respect to transdisciplinary approaches.

Current discussions in academe have centered on creating a unified theory of transformative learning theory with explanatory power across individual, group, and contextual settings and on resolving persistent tensions in the field (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Transatlantic dialogues have criticized North American theories as overly individualistic, psychological, and decontextualized (Kokkos, 2014; Formenti & Dirkx, 2014). Keeping these dialogues foregrounded, I argue for a multi-perspectival view of transformative learning, using the concept of an “ecology of transformative learning,” that sees a living network of related theories that have co-arisen and that mutually influence and enrich each other, as part of an organicist conception of learning (Sterling, 2009). Theoretical diversity is important, and the fundamentally

¹

Elizabeth A. Lange (elange@sfx.ca) is Associate Professor of Adult Education at St. Francis Xavier University, Canada. She has 30 years of experience as an educator and facilitator of transformative learning in formal and nonformal settings. Her research focuses on transformative learning, sustainability education for adults, and transcultural learning and immigration. The introductory text *The Purposes of Adult Education, 3rd Edition*, 2014, was co-written with Bruce Spencer (Thompson Educational Publishing).

contradictory assumptions behind various theories should not be superficially resolved. Further, moving toward a relational epistemology (beyond constructivist and humanist ideas of relationality) that envisions the self “as porous and permeable, in interdependent co-relation” with all other entities (Danvers, 2009) can shift the focus of research, theory, and practice in fruitful directions. This transformation of transformative learning theory and practice (Lange, 2012a) can help academe address the complex issues and ‘wicked problems’ (Weber & Khademian, 2008) confronting humankind at this historical moment.

Modernist conceptions of transformative learning

Etymologically, the word *transformation* emerged in Old French and Late Latin in the 1400s, particularly in relation to Christianity and ideas of conversion and liberation. *Trans* means to “go across” indicating dynamic movement, and formation as *formus* or *Morpheus* means “morphing” or “taking a new shape.” Thus *transformation* is generally understood as a fundamental change in structure. The modern assumption is that change, rather than tradition and continuity, is good and that transformation as thorough or radical change is even better. Transformation further developed within a constellation of Enlightenment ideas: rationalism, humanism, universalism, autonomous individualism, instrumentalism, change as linear and material, progress as constant improvability, cause-effect interventionism, and the goals of freedom and emancipation.

There have been three original streams of transformative learning theory in adult education (Taylor, 1998): psycho-critical transformative learning originally theorized by Jack Mezirow (1991); social-emancipatory transformative learning based on the work of Paulo Freire (1970); and psychoanalytical transformative learning based on Carl Jung’s work (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Yet, all three variants lie largely within a modernist epistemology.

Mezirow, who coined the term “transformative learning,” consistently defines transformation as a specifically adult process that, in Cranton’s (2005) words, creates a “structural reorganization of the way a person looks at himself or herself ” (p. 631). Transformative learning is a process of questioning beliefs, values, and perspectives that have been uncritically assimilated and that form a personal frame of reference. This is comprised of *meaning perspectives*, the habits of mind or ways of thinking that comprise a personal paradigm, as well as *meaning schemes*, the attitudes, ideas, and beliefs within a given world view. Mezirow (1991) identified ten phases, widely debated, but the most research-confirmed phase is the disorienting dilemma—an unexpected event, person or idea that does not make sense within the existing framework, creating dissonance. Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning is founded on many modernist assumptions: it is individualistic, as the locus of change is the individual; it is cognitivist, as frameworks of thinking are to change and the goal is autonomous thought; it is rationalist, as transformative learning occurs through reasoned, analytical discussion; and it is progressivist, as the change is in a positive direction, toward more “inclusive, permeable and discriminating perspectives” (Mezirow, 1991).

For Freire, a Brazilian adult literacy educator, education is always political as educators can never stand outside of power structures. The goal for critical educators is to foster an individual’s understanding of the larger political and economic forces in which they exist, to

name the world as they name the word, or to become literate/educated. The intent is not personal transformation, although that will happen; it is societal transformation, where education fosters Action *against* poverty, oppression, repression, and injustice, and *for* social justice, equality, democracy, and freedom, what Freire called *denouncing/announcing*. One cannot seek freedom for oneself without others being free, as that would not constitute true freedom. *Conscientization* or critical consciousness uses the processes of problem-posing and ideology critique: to examine how ruling groups generate specific knowledge and values to win consent and create hegemony; to connect with a collective moral vision; and then to take action toward the creation of a just society. Enriching Freirean thinking, feminist poststructuralists move beyond dualism to acknowledge the multiplicity of oppressive relations, the differing positions of privilege and oppression within a person and/or group, the importance of emotional knowledge, and the way partial knowledges can build common cause (Weiler, 1994). Critical transformative learning is not individualist as it utilizes a socially embedded understanding as ‘communal individuality’ (Lange, 2012b), but it is rationalist in its criticality, progressive in privileging change, and interventionist in its commitment to social change.

Jung’s theory, *analytical depth psychology*, uses psychoanalysis toward the goal of individuation, an adult process that can lead toward wholeness of Self through the integration of the conscious and unconscious parts of the personality. Educators assist in the process of self-exploration and discernment that brings the unconscious components of the psyche forward to dialogue with the ego, which dominates in the first half of life. It is an emotional and symbolic rather than cognitive process, and it can be engaged when the same psychic conflicts and archetypal motifs continuously emerge. Boyd (1989) further describes *transformation* as an “expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration” (p. 459). Like Boyd, Clark, and Dirkx (2000) take issue with the modernist view of the Self as unitary, autonomous, coherent, rational, and self-determining. They present the Self as dynamic, plural and inherently conflicted, with unconscious agendas that drive action. This transformative learning theory moves beyond rationality to privilege the extra-rational—tapping emotions, symbols, and the imagination. It moves beyond individualism to the transpersonal level where individuals begin to see themselves in relationship to a greater collective, including the collective unconscious. Yet, it is acontextual as it does not often consider social situatedness or political and economic context. It has interventionist and reconstructibility elements, assuming the sifting and sorting of unconscious material can restructure the personality toward an ideal endpoint.

An ecology of Transformative Learning theory

Beyond the critiques above, modernist forms of transformative learning also have an underlying androcentrism, ethnocentrism (specifically Eurowesternism), and anthropocentrism, and they also maintain a mind/body split and a reason/emotion split. They have a mechanistic understanding of change in which entities are fundamentally separate and in which change is caused by tinkering with the properties of, or activities between, entities. However, a wealth of perspectives is emerging to challenge modernist assumptions: spiritual perspectives, feminist perspectives, postcolonial perspectives, and ecological perspectives (Lange, 2013). Rather than attempting to create a unified theory “in which current perspectives can be brought together

under one theoretical umbrella” (Cranton & Taylor, 2012), it is important to honor the diversity of the many faces of transformation within the human condition and the spiral of learning over a lifetime. Transformative learning theories can be considered a living network of co-arising and interrelated theories that reveal partial truths and are mutually influencing and enriching. The academic conversation about transformative learning is now breaking open, through global dialogue and is problematizing its modernist, humanist, and anthropocentric framework. Creating space for knowledge/knowing that emanates from imagination, emotion, instinct, intuition, bodymind, spirit, and all life forms and humans that have been othered, can deepen understandings. The power of a transdisciplinary approach to transformative learning, which dialogues and derives research questions from across disciplines as an integrated approach to larger societal questions as well as transdisciplinary questions about transformative learning itself, provides an important opportunity for the adult and higher education field.

Relational and transformative nature of reality

One example of an antidote to Western modernist conceptions comes from ancient ideas as well as New Science ideas on the nature of reality (Capra, 2002). As ancient philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (530-470 BCE) suggested, reality is constant change and flow, like a river. While the Western tradition veered toward logical empiricism, indigenous and various Eastern epistemologies continued their focus on relationship, process, and change. Ruiz (2000) explains the Toltec worldview:

Everything that exists is in an eternal transformation... Energy is always transforming because it is alive. Life is the force that makes the transformation of energy possible. The force of Life that opens a flower is the same force that makes us grow older... imagine how you used to look when you were five years old compared with now. It still is you, but the body is completely different... The trees and mountains — all of nature is changing because Life is passing through everything and everything is reacting to Life (pp. 119-120).

This is consistent with findings in quantum physics that describe the subatomic reality of the universe as interchangeable between matter and energy, part of a vast creative and living network (Barad, 2007; Spretnak, 2011). Building on living systems theory, Capra (2002) suggests that the entanglements of four elements need to be considered—form, matter, process, and meaning—which can co-emerge into new patterns. So, the “form that transforms” (Kegan, 2000) is only a one facet of transformative learning.

Further, according to New Science, reality is highly sensitive, nonlinear, relational, and self-renewing. This new *ontoepistemological* framework, as Barad (2007) calls it, offers some significant provocations to current theories, illustrating an organic and relational conception that moves beyond *either/or* dualism toward *both/and* thinking and highlights the richness of transdisciplinarity. As Spretnak (2011) asserts, we have only begun to explore “the deeply relational nature of reality” (p. 1). Yet, many disciplines now are growing into an understanding of relationality (Barad, 2007; Best & Kellner, 1997); part of what Spretnak (2011) calls the Relational Shift.

For feminist physicist Karen Barad, relationality goes beyond ideas such as: symbolic interactionism, where the self is the product of social interaction and symbols such as language that carry meaning; social constructionism, where reality is construction of human thought; or transactionalism, in which autonomous entities *interact* and constantly influence the other. Barad explains relationality this way:

Existence is not an individual affair... To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Individuals do not pre-exist their interaction; rather individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled *intra-relating*" (2007, p. ix; italics added).

Spretnak (2011) adds, "Inherent relationships with our bodymind, with other people, with animals, with the rest of nature all interact and infuse each other, making us what we are. It is not merely a matter of *having* relationships but *being* relationships" (p. 11). Our being *is* a constellation of relationships and our mind is a collective affair, largely opposed to what we have been taught in modern education, including academe (Spretnak, 2011). Thus, the most confounding feature of transformative learning is that the dynamics of change are also constantly changing. There is no universal or predictable process, and this is part of the mystery of transformation.

Our historical moment

We live in dark times, although Heraclitus said the same. Economic and political powers are becoming more concentrated, and social inequality and injustice are intensifying. Many of the ambivalent gains of the social welfare state are evaporating, various forms of social solidarity are being disassembled, the moral order has been reoriented to social Darwinism and the rights of the strong, and participatory democracy has fallen on the sword of distracted passivity and political cynicism. Thirty years of the neoliberal revolution has enshrined the power of economic elites, corporate freedom, and perpetual profit at the expense of life forms and life-giving capacities. The neoliberal turn in academe has recalibrated knowledge generation toward academic production and profit-making rather than toward informing citizenship engagement for a vibrant democracy and addressing the complexity of global social, economic, and climate issues.

If we miss the common ground underlying many of the changes
– a shift from a mechanistic way of seeing the world to relational
ways of seeing the world – we will fail to tap the power and potential
of this vast and historic turning. (Spretnak, 2011, p. 18).

The field of transformative learning has an important opportunity to be historically-responsive and assist in the Relational Shift. The work of transformative educators is finding the spaces between conditioning and fuller being, understanding the arbitrariness of existing investments and frameworks of perception, and then activating the human imagination and relational perceptions. To foster relationally-based transformative learning is to create

disturbances, not casual interventions, and to help trigger a process of emergence through which meaningful ideas or practices circulate through feedback loops and communication networks. If a critical point of tension and instability of meaning occurs, there *may* be the creation of novelty, structural transformation and a breakthrough into a new state of order that can be more life-giving (Capra, 2002). This historic challenge is as significant as the shift from the medieval worldview to a scientific, Enlightenment worldview.

References

- Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Boyd, R. (1989). Facilitating personal transformation in small groups. *Small Group Behaviour*, 20, 459-474.
- Boyd, R., & Myers, G. (1988). Transformative education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 7(4), 261-284.
- Capra, F. (2002). *The hidden connections*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Clark, M., & Dirkx, J. (2000). Moving beyond a unitary self. In A. Wilson & E. Hayes, (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 101-116). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cranton, P. (2005). Transformative learning. In L. English (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of adult education* (pp. 630-637). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cranton, P., & Taylor, Ed. (2012). Transformative learning theory: Seeking a more unified theory. In E. Taylor & P. Cranton, (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning* (pp. 3-20). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Danvers, J. (2009). Being-in-the-world. In A. Stibbe (Ed.), *The handbook of sustainability literacy* (pp. 185-190). Totnes, UK: green books.
- Formenti, L., & Dirkx, J. (2014). A dialogical reframing. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 12(2), 123-133.
-
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Seabury Press.
- Kegan, R. (2000). What “form” transforms? In J. Mezirow & Associates. *Learning as Transformation* (pp. 35-69). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Kokkos, A. (2014). Could transformative learning be appreciated in Europe? *Journal of Transformative Education*, 12(2), 180-196.
- Lange, E. A. (2013). Interrogating transformative learning theory: Canadian contributions. In T. Nesbit, S. Brigham, T. Gibb, & N. Taber (Eds.), *Building on critical traditions: Adult education and learning in Canada* (pp. 91-102). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Lange, E. A. (2012a). Transforming transformative learning through sustainability and the New Science. In E. Taylor, P. Cranton & Associates (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning* (pp. 195-211). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
-
- Lange, E. (2012b). Is Freirean transformative learning the Trojan horse of globalization and enemy of sustainability education?: A response to C. A. Bowers. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 10(1), 3-21. doi: 10.1177/1541344612453880
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ruiz, D. M. (2000). *The four agreements companion book*. San Rafael, CA: Amber-Allen Publishing.
- Spretnak, C. (2011). *Relational reality*. Topsham, ME: Green Horizon Books.
- Sterling, S. (2009). Ecological intelligence. In A. Stibbe (Ed.), *The handbook of sustainability literacy* (pp. 77-83). Totnes, UK: green books.
- Taylor, E. (2008). Transformative learning theory. In S. Merriam (Ed.), *Third update on adult learning* (pp. 5-16). New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 119. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Taylor, E. (1998). *The theory and practice of transformative learning*. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearing House on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. Information Series, No. 374.
- Weber, E., & Khademian, A. (2009). Wicked problems, knowledge challenges and collaborative capacity builders in network settings. *Public Administrative Review*, 334-349. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00866.x
- Weiler, K. (1994). Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. In P. McLaren & C. Lankshear (Eds.), *Politics of liberation* (pp. 12-40). London, UK: Routledge.