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# Transformative learning in higher education

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## The definition of transformative learning

When confronted with the question of how Transformative Learning can be promoted in higher education my immediate reaction is that this question cannot be answered or even dealt with reasonably without first stating or discussing what this term actually means, because it is used today in so many different ways and with very different understandings. I shall not go into details about this, but only mention that I have argued thoroughly in favor of defining transformative learning as “learning which implies change in the identity of the learner” (Illeris, 2014a, p. 40, 2014b, 2014c).

In this definition I have included all three of the dimensions of any learning: the cognitive, the emotional, and the social (Illeris, 2002, 2007), I have connected transformative learning to general learning theory (Illeris, 2004a), and I have related it to the comprehensive literature on the concept of the identity in modern psychology and sociology (e.g., Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2000). I have also engaged with discussions about transformative learning in relation to several relevant mainly psychological areas such as different life ages, motivation, defense, competence development, various learning environments, and such concepts as progressive, regressive, restoring, and collective transformations (Illeris, 2014a). And in this way I have also given satisfactory answers to both Robert Kegan's pressing question of “what form transforms?” (Kegan, 2000) and Michael Newman's “mutinous thoughts” (Newman, 2012, 2014). The central understanding behind all of this is that today individual life conditions are changed and developed so rapidly that we have to make changes in our identities all the time, and we make these changes exactly by transformative learning processes.

The second important condition to emphasize in connection to this definition is that transformative learning is just one kind or type of learning among others. Theoretically I distinguish between four main types of learning: cumulative, assimilative, accommodative, and transformative learning (Illeris, 2004a, 2007, 2009). There is clearly a progression in these four learning types in the way that they are increasingly complex, but it is a misunderstanding to believe that a more complex learning type is better than a less complex one. Good learning in this context occurs when the learner practices the type of learning that is relevant to her or him in the given situation. However, we cannot consciously choose which learning type to practice; this is decided unconsciously in our brain on the basis of prior learning and motivational conditions.

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that transformative learning cannot be taught. Learning is an internal process, and a teacher or educator can only try to organize the environment, situations, procedures, content, and teaching in ways which optimize or promote the probability of transformative learning. How this can be done in the various main areas of schooling, education, and other learning environments has for almost fifty years been a central object of my educational research and practice, usually by so-called educational developmental work in a co-operation between educational theorists and practitioners in various fields such as youth education, adult education, and workplace learning – combined with continuous development of my theoretical understanding of learning (Illeris, 2007). On this basis I am convinced that the approach of project studies is in general the most appropriate way of optimizing the possibilities of transformative

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learning, especially in higher education, but also in other areas of youth and adult education. I shall therefore in the following go into a bit more into detail about my practical experience of this.

### **The idea of project studies**

In 1972 a new and in many ways different university was opened in Roskilde, Denmark's capital in the Early Middle Ages, thirty kilometers west of Copenhagen. The crucial idea as developed mainly by discussions among the Danish labor party, which was in government, some progressive educational researchers and practitioners; and not least some of the more reflective students of the student revolt in 1968, was that the dominant kinds of educational activities at this university should be so-called project work or project studies.

The general design was that all students started by two years of basic studies, which were interdisciplinary inside the humanities, the social sciences or the natural sciences, and comprised of four half-year group projects, chosen and carried out by the students with the teachers as supervisors and supporters. After this the students choose two subjects to be studied separately or integrated for three years. A special possibility for the last three years was the new technical-social education, which should lead to jobs in which technical qualifications were combined with societal insight. Another innovation was the subject of communication, which could be combined with any other subject, and which has grown to be the largest subject at all. More traditional courses and specific demands regulations were given to a rather different extent in the various areas and subjects, but should never exceed fifty percent of the study time, preparation time included.

All students and staff were organized in so-called houses with sixty-three students, 5-6 teachers, and a secretary. It is worth noticing that two important academic fields, engineering and medicine, were not included as strong professional organizations had convinced the authorities that these areas could only be studied in the traditional ways.

Two years later a similar university was established in Aalborg in Jutland, but here there was only one basic year and four specialized years, which made it possible to include engineering, but not medicine. Both of these universities and their approaches have survived with minor adjustments. All the educational changes and reconstructions of the late modern competition state, and they are today integrated institutions in the Danish educational and academic system. Our candidates have been well received on the academic labor market, in periods of unemployment they have had higher rates of employment than candidates from more traditional universities, and they have been recognized particularly for their social competencies and flexibility.

### **Research and developmental work on project studies**

Although I had in 1972 not yet fully finished my studies of psychology at Copenhagen University I was attached to the new Roskilde University from the start, because I had, as part of my dissertation on learning psychology, followed for one year a similarly organized experiment at a teacher training college. So I was deeply involved in the development of the project studies at Roskilde University and also wrote a theoretical based general learning and qualification book on the topic, which was published (in Danish) in 1974 and together with a more practical book (1977), was sold in great numbers in the Scandinavian countries. However, only short accounts were published much later in English (Illeris, 1991, 1999, 2003a).

Later I worked for periods of several years with project organization in youth vocational training (Illeris, 2003b), in vocational training courses for low-skilled adults (Ahrenkiel & Illeris, 2000; Illeris, 2006), and in organizational and workplace learning (Illeris, 1986, 2003c). All along my involvement has been combined with the development of general learning theory and educational innovation. Since 1993 at least one project of this kind has been mandatory in Danish lower secondary schools, and since 2004 one has also been mandatory in upper secondary schools.

Seen in relation to transformative learning, it is evident that relevant project studies at all educational levels, to a greater extent than more ordinary teaching and studies, involve challenges and possibilities that may provoke such learning. This is because this way of dealing with learning tends to generate situations in which the students are provoked to consider what they want, think, mean, do, and prefer in relation to various vocational, academic, professional, social and/or personal goals, issues and problems, which may all relate both to their identities and to the development of intended competence. However, the strength and value of these obvious qualities to a great extent depend on how the projects are chosen and dealt with in practice, so I shall here go a bit further into the main points of a proper educational project course, particularly in higher education (more specific accounts of this in different connections can be found in Illeris 1999, 2004b, and 2011).

### **The typical course of a project**

The structure of a typical course can be broken down into a series of phases, but it must be understood that this implies an analytic reduction, and practice is much more complex and varied. With this qualification, the following phases can be described:

*Introduction and group formation*, including clarification of practical rules and conditions, and eventually also an introduction to the subject area in question, – which should be appealing and provocative. As well, if necessary, as a social introduction. Sometimes these functions can be united in a pilot project, which is short, well-supervised, and well-prepared. Group formation should be carried out by the students and involves both the choice of project themes and the composition of groups. The groups must be able to justify their themes as relevant and exemplary in relation to the area or subject to be studied. The composition of groups may be a rather emotional matter, which should as far as possible be left to the students, the basic condition being that no groups are definitely constituted before all students are included. The optimal group size will usually be 3-5 participants: bigger groups may be relevant for large projects, but such groups must then involve a rather tight structure of cooperation, and single projects should be accepted only in special cases. In general a rather narrow time limit for this phase is recommended, as practice has shown that too much time may lead to increased problems and does not result in a better group structure.

*Problem formulation and practical planning*. In this phase the specific problems of the project must be formulated precisely – a process that will also uncover a lot of biases and differences in the project group, forcing the group to make a series of fundamental decisions. Problem formulation is a very significant issue in the project method, and it is important that both students and supervisors pay the utmost attention to all details in the formulation so that the formulation can function as a common statement of what precisely the group has agreed on. It must be emphasized that this is fundamentally different from what has sometimes been called Problem Based Learning, because the problems are chosen and formulated by the students themselves and not by the curriculum, the teacher, or a textbook. The practical planning includes planning time, delegation of tasks, internal and external appointments, etc. In this connection the planning of fixed and regular internal evaluations has proven to be of great importance.

*The investigation phase* is the lengthy central phase during which, in order to probe the problem area selected, an attempt is made to establish ever-increasing understanding, to relate to relevant theory, etc. In this phase it is particularly important to have a high degree of internal coordination and to write down all agreements, decisions, references, ideas, drafts, etc. Another important feature is communication between the project group and the supervisor, who must strike the difficult balance of providing professional guidance without forcing the group to accept his or her own interests or points of view.

*The product phase* is usually about the production of a written report, but in principle any other suitable medium or combination of media may be used. In this phase time will usually be of the essence, and the group must find out how to dispose, coordinate, and produce the report in the most expeditious and effective way possible, which is often a hard but very useful learning process. This phase should conclude with an internal evaluation by the students and supervisor; eventually two groups may be involved in each other's evaluation in order to provide some fresh input and feedback.

*External examination*, including formal approval and, eventually, common or individual grading, must be regarded as a legal control and not a hostile intervention. In any case, it is fundamentally different from the usual kind of examination, because the starting point is the students' report and not a randomly chosen topic from the curriculum. It usually takes the form of a group examination with individual grading.

*Post-evaluation* is seen from the point of learning, and especially transformative learning, a most important phase, that is unfortunately not taken as seriously as it should be. It includes a final internal discussion and statement of the learning and of the benefits and consequences of the project for every single member of the group, and it can be combined with some kind of a social arrangement.

### **Optimizing transformative learning**

Transformative learning may take place for any of the participants at any time during the project course. But experience shows that the possibility of transformative learning is concentrated in connection with problem formulation, internal evaluation during the investigation phase, and the final internal evaluation and post-evaluation. This, of course, has to do with the fact that these phases include important considerations and decisions, as well as the possibility of internal disagreement, compromises, and other elements in which the individual's role in and contribution to the project are challenged.

It is important for teachers and supervisors to realize that their role in this connection is not to take responsibility for elements of the project, but rather to assist the group in detecting the underlying individual and social sources of disagreements and problems and to help to create an atmosphere in which it is permissible and safe to formulate personal standpoints and also to express uncertainty and doubt. The effectual elements of project studies of this kind can be found in the combination of serious problem-solving and social cooperation in a context of personal meaning and involvement.

When Jack Mezirow originally launched the concept of transformative learning in his research, he based his arguments on studies of women returning to community college after several years outside the educational system (Mezirow, 1978, 1991). I am sure that this situation in many ways resembles the project studies I have described, – because they combine new learning with challenges to accustomed and habitual understandings, attitudes, and ways of relating to others.

### **The present situation**

It is evident that project studies are very different from, not to say in direct contrast to, the dominant trends in the educational policy of late-modern competition states, which regard education as a production process in which effectiveness and outcome can be boosted by such means as large institutions with powerful and autocratic leadership, exact objectives, tests, measurements, and clear and strong external incentives for leaders, staff, and students. This kind of set-up seems in higher

education to lead mainly to a rather superficial learning of an academic or professional syllabus. Conversely, transformative learning is about personal development, deeper understanding, and increased tolerance and flexibility.

However, these qualities are certainly not incompatible with academic and professional qualification. The essential contrast is between the superficial understanding of learning, which dominates the competition state approach, and the deep human commitment and insight behind transformative learning. Therefore it is also important to notice that up-to-date and well-informed managers and organizations in both the private and the public sectors have all the time supported the universities in Roskilde and Aalborg against the attacks from more traditional academic and conservative positions – and that these attacks have gradually died away, at the same time as the need for transformative learning in the present rapidly changing society has become increasingly evident and urgent.

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