



Reconsidering the Roots of Transformative Education: Habermas and Mezirow

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TRANSFORMATION IN MEZIROW'S THEORY

“Civil society has the dual function of ensuring that those who exercise power do not abuse it and of transforming the system to regenerate more democratic practices” (Fleming, 2018, p. 9). Proceeding from this notion of civil society, the call for transformation, for more democratic practices, provides the starting point for a theory of learning that is concerned with fostering democratic practices by challenging taken-for-granted ways of (co-)creating society. As “an approach to teaching based on promoting change, where educators challenge learners to critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate

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to the world around them” (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. xi), transformative learning theory seeks to assist adult learners in their attempt to liberate themselves from assumptions that limit their way of being and living. Mezirow outlined the process of perspective transformation where learners came to a new, transformed understanding of themselves, including their self-concept and identity. They were able to liberate themselves from the governing ideas and social norms regarding sex-stereotypical roles (Mezirow, 1978a). This process of liberation emerged through the women’s movement: Learners came to understand how the public breaks into the private by gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between personal problems and public issues, where “women’s experiences became de-privatized” (Hart, 1990b, p. 56).

Where does the idea of transforming one’s way of being and living come from? The process of perspective transformation is historically rooted in social movements, more precisely the women’s movement (e.g., Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1990a). In the course of Mezirow’s investigation for factors that impede or facilitate the progress of re-entry programs for women—supporting them to pursue a degree or a job after an extended hiatus—he came to identify a structural re-organization of women’s relationship to themselves and the world around them (Mezirow, 1978a). It is the intersection of the women’s movement and adult education—through re-entry programs—that gave rise to the development of Mezirow’s theory of transformation (Baumgartner, 2012).

The heart of the theory “refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7). Instead of acting under assumptions that have been uncritically assimilated (as ideas, beliefs, and norms) from others, adults need to learn how to negotiate and act on their own purposes, meanings, and values. The phenomenon of transformation central to this way of learning sets out the idea of a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167),

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.

The meaning perspective to be transformed is also described as a frame of reference which constitutes itself out of experiences (Mezirow, 2012, p. 82),

the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions. It involves cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. It selectively shapes and delimits perception, cognition, feelings, and disposition by predisposing our intentions, expectations, and purposes. It provides the context for making meaning.

Transforming this perspective is an “epiphanic, or apocalyptic, cognitive event—a shift in the tectonic plates of one’s assumptive clusters” (Brookfield, 2000, p. 139). The phenomenon of transformation is therefore very different from the idea of change. Mezirow (1991, pp. 168–169) differentiates 10 phases within the process of perspective transformation, starting with a (1) disorienting dilemma which sets the stage for (2) an exploration of feelings like guilt or shame that arise in the wake of the crisis or dilemma. In a third step (3) learners critically assess and reflect their guiding assumptions underlying their current meaning perspective. What follows is (4) the realization that one’s personal problem is shared and (sometimes) a public issue: The public breaks into the private sphere and learners realize that others have negotiated and undergone similar changes and challenges. In the next phase (5) learners explore alternative ways of being and living in terms of relationships, roles, and actions. This phase is complemented by another phase, where (6) learners plan (new) courses of action and (7) acquire new knowledge in order to put these courses of action into practice. In the aftermath of (8) learners trying out these new roles (provisionally), they (9) build (self-) confidence and competence and (10) re-integrate into their lives, employing a new, transformed (meaning) perspective.

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning “is directed at the intersection of the individual and social” (Tennant, 1993, p. 36). This becomes apparent in Mezirow’s description of the transformation learner, who “comes to identify her personal problem as a common one and a public issue” (Mezirow, 1978a, p. 15), as described in phase four. This tension between individually experienced problems and structural, public issues calls for both, individual and collective action, whereas the choice of social action resides at the same time with the learner. Mezirow (1989) sees collective and social transformation as a separate entity from individual

transformation. The phenomenon of perspective transformation is located within the individual, not within society (Tennant, 1993), “the site of change—as well as agency—is envisaged primarily in terms of the transformation of the inner mental landscape of an individual learner which may, or may not, have broader social consequences” (Finnegan, 2019, p. 48). Finnegan (2019) argues that even though Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning is concerned with the individual, it is not an individualistic theory, as Mezirow puts an emphasis on intersubjective learning through discourse.

HABERMAS’ ACCOUNT OF TRANSFORMATION

Mezirow acknowledges Habermas as a major influence, and Habermas, like Mezirow, presents a theory of transformation.

Habermas developed as an intellectual in the Frankfurt School and led it after 1964. The first generation of the Frankfurt School was certainly committed to social transformation. Most founders of the School sought dramatic transformation through revolution rather than the gradual amelioration promised by social democrats (Benjamin, 1968, p. 260). Not only did these thinkers decry the social and economic system of their time, but they viewed human personalities as distorted and limited by capitalism. They combined Marxian analysis of large-scale social forces with a Freudian account of neurosis to paint a portrait of both people and societies in dire need of transformation.

In contrast to certain orthodox forms of Marxism, the founders of the Frankfurt School believed that culture was not merely a consequence of economic realities but could influence the course of history. For example, propagandistic mass culture and ideology could persuade the working class to support capitalism or even fascism. As Raymond Geuss (1981) writes,

The very heart of the critical theory of society is the criticism of ideology. Their ideology is what prevents the agents in the society from correctly perceiving their true situation and real interests; if they are to free themselves from social repression, the agents must rid themselves of ideological illusion. (pp. 2–3)

Therefore, transformation must address culture, not just politics and economics.

The first generation of the Frankfurt School saw all mass communication in a capitalist society as ideology. Their main recommendation was to reveal this fact as a kind of “talking cure” that might free the working class of its neuroses. But their culture-critique proved ineffective and it missed, Habermas felt, the positive “potentials” of discourse and communication in capitalist democracies (Habermas, 1987, p. 381).

One of Habermas’ core insights is that discourse can either be strategic (aiming to make another person believe and act as you want) or communicative (aiming to persuade another person on the basis of good arguments, and perhaps to change your own view if other arguments prove better). In small groups, people can act communicatively, exchanging arguments and reasons. In this way, they can challenge the assumptions of their respective lifeworlds. A *lifeworld* is a “reservoir of taken-for-granted, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation” (Habermas, 1987, p. 124). We each need a lifeworld; it is the content or material that gives any life its significance and uniqueness. However, we can—and should—test our assumptions in discourse with other people, adjusting them or replacing them one by one whenever our fellow citizens offer valid criticisms.

In this way, ordinary discourse can be transformative. Some critics take Habermas to task for assuming that this kind of face-to-face deliberation is all we need to improve both society and our inner lives (e.g., Young, 2001 p. 690). Habermas does analyze discussions in ideal settings in order to yield insights about the logic of communication (e.g., Habermas, 1975, pp. 110, 108). But it is a mistake to think that his social prescription is to create many ideal settings for discussion. He offers a much more realistic and thorough social critique. Borrowing from Max Weber, Habermas argues that modernity is characterized by “systems” (particularly markets and states) that employ people in specialized social roles (Habermas, 1987, pp. 301–404). Systems use efficient means to pursue fixed aims: profit in the case of businesses, power and control for governments. They are therefore biased toward instrumental rather than communicative action. They threaten to swamp the spontaneous and free discussions of small groups with mass communications—commercial advertising, state propaganda, and popular culture—all aimed at manipulating people to do what the systems want from them.

One solution that Habermas proposes is a properly organized democratic constitution that protects freedom of speech and establishes an

accountable legislature as a space for true deliberation (Habermas, 1985). Another (related) solution is a vibrant public sphere composed of publications, associations, and venues of discussion (Habermas, 1964, and many subsequent works). The public sphere is always at risk of being colonized by market and governmental systems, but it is not a myth. People genuinely improve what they believe and value by participating in the public spheres of modern societies, even if newspapers belong to businesses and libraries are bureaucracies.

Finally, Habermas endorses social movements that challenge the assumptions of their societies and compel discussion. He sees them as popular forces that arise in civil society to challenge institutional inertia and prevent the colonization of the lifeworld (Fleming, 2018). He ends his magisterial two-volume work, *Theory of Communicative Action*, with a positive account of the social movements of his day, including feminism and the anti-nuclear movement. In the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas talks very little about civil discussions among peers but concludes with an invocation of squatters and protesters in the streets. The widespread interpretation of Habermas as a proponent of rational deliberation is therefore misleading (Levine, 2018).

WHAT MEZIROW LEARNED FROM HABERMAS

In order to further identify the overlooked resources of Habermas' works, we need to first take a look into the ideas and concepts that Mezirow incorporated into his theory of transformative learning (for an extended critical analysis, see Eschenbacher, 2018).

Mezirow adopts Habermas' idea to distinguish between instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory interest and interprets them as domains of learning: "A key proposition of transformative learning theory recognizes the validity of Habermas's fundamental distinction between instrumental and communicative learning" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59). Following Habermas, the third interest, the emancipatory interest, has a derived status as distinguished from the other two domains (Habermas, 1971). It pertains to critical theory as a scientific field. Mezirow (1981) conceptualizes Habermas' third knowledge domain as the learning involved in perspective transformation. He later sets Habermas' distinction aside, which adds to the confusion: "Although Habermas suggests a third learning domain, emancipation, transformation theory redefines this as the transformation process that pertains

in both instrumental and communicative learning domains” (Mezirow, 2012, p. 78). Apart from this confusion, Mezirow develops a theory of adult learning that opens up a new path for educators by differentiating different domains of learning. Whereas an instrumental view of learning was dominant in the field of adult learning (Dirkx, 1998), Mezirow’s emphasis on transforming existing ways of knowing and learning, and generating more democratic practices, put adult education in a position to initiate and catalyze processes of transformation within the individual learner and society as a whole.

Habermas’ adult learning crisis and the call for transformation are reflected in Mezirow’s democratic vision of society and the necessity of developing a theory that enables adults to live in and co-create a society of which they are a part, and to deliberate decision-making processes that are deeply relevant for exploring alternatives on how to live life. It is not surprising that this process of deliberation and decision-making is at the core of transformation theory. As we have seen earlier, the theory is concerned with a learning process that enables adults to act on their own purposes and meanings instead of acting under the guiding assumptions acquired from others uncritically.

The theory aims on enabling adults to own their lives in the sense of being better able to take control in a (social) responsible way by making one’s own decisions (Mezirow, 2000). Therefore, Mezirow (1991) incorporates Habermas’ () idea of rational discourse to promote learning transformatively by exchanging arguments and puts it at the heart of the theory. Central to Habermas’ notion of discourse is that all participating have equal access and an opportunity to debate. Transformative learning theory’s grounding in Habermas’ work is not surprising, although his reliance on Habermas’ notion of discourse, ideal speech conditions, and domains of learning were not part of the initial study. Women were hindered to deliberate decisions or engage in the question what their lives should or could look like.

Discourse as the forum where one learns transformatively also needs enabling conditions, to assure the kind of perspective transformation Mezirow was looking for. This led him to ultimately implement Habermas’ conception of an ideal speech situation, as a key element within transformative learning theory (e.g., Mezirow, 1991), although within the context of adult learning, the ideal speech situation is “theoretically based, with little support from empirical research” (Taylor, 1997, p. 54). This is unfortunate insofar as Mezirow ties fostering transformative

learning up with promoting an ideal speech situation to ground his theory in a democratic vision but leaves the educator without further guidance in his writings.

The intertwined relationship between generating more democratic practices and learning transformatively becomes also apparent in the emphasis on critical (Brookfield, 2005), as Mezirow (2000) aims at expanding the learners' ability to reason and to engage in discourse. Furthermore, Finnegan (2019) points to Mezirow's interest in supporting a democratic learning culture: "Mezirow could not be clearer that he is interested in supporting democratic movements and progressive social change—but they are not foregrounded in a systematic way" (p. 47). This lack of a systematic framework opens up another opportunity to reflect on Habermas' work against transformative learning theory's background, as an yet overlooked resource.

Others have argued for a dual agenda that emerges from the theory's grounding in Habermas' work. We learn from Fleming (2002) that this agenda "involves the strengthening of the lifeworld against colonization by the system, and it involves taking into the system a commitment to fostering critical reflection, critical learning, and supporting discursive understanding" (p. 13). Transformative education, following Mezirow and his application of Habermas, has then "a clear mandate to work in the seams and at the boundaries of systems to humanize and transform them so that they operate in the interests of all" (Fleming, 2018, p. 9). The call for transformation in the public sphere is reflected in the commitment of adult educators to "encourage the opening of public spheres of discourse" as Mezirow (1990b, p. 375) puts it, and in Habermas' notion of discourse itself, which clearly belongs to the public sphere (Rorty, 1989, for an extended analysis, see Eschenbacher, 2019 and Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020).

To return to transformation theory's agenda, the lifeworld should be strengthened against the system, but how can that be translated into learning transformatively? The proximity to Habermas' notion of lifeworld becomes clear in Mezirow's conceptualization as being "made up of a vast inventory of unquestioned assumptions and shared cultural convictions, including codes, norms, roles, social practices, psychological patterns of dealing with others, and individual skills" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 69). Consequently, the lifeworld can be strengthened by being transformed within transformative learning theory. Fleming (2002) suggests we think of a frame of reference or meaning perspective as a way to define

the lifeworld, being constituted through personality, social, and cultural dimensions. The phenomenon of perspective transformation involves a process where we are “rethinking deeply held, and often distorted beliefs, about who we are and our lifeworld” (Finnegan, 2019, p. 46), when we defend our freedom and ultimately liberate our “colonized meaning perspective” (Hart, 1990b, p. 52).

This process of transformation is in need of the other, a community, providing a safe (enough) space for assessing the ground of one’s guiding assumptions, and experiencing a tectonic shift in one’s assumptive clusters (Brookfield, 2000). This kind of learning needs others, likeminded learners, serving as “critical mirrors who highlight our assumptions for us and reflect them back to us in unfamiliar, surprising, and disturbing ways” (Brookfield, 2000, p. 146). Following Mezirow, Brookfield (2012) argues that learning transformatively is about freeing oneself from reified forms of thought (ideology), which implies for him the necessity to change—or transform—the very structures that produce and maintain these reified forms of thought. The tension one encounters here is that the very process of transforming an individual’s meaning perspective while it is simultaneously permeated by structural issues and society itself (Hart, 1990a). Vice versa, Heaney and Horton (1990) argue that transformative education—from a Freireian perspective—is only emancipatory when it becomes reflected in political institutions, such as when laws become institutionalized; which Mezirow would most probably agree with.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING TAKE FROM HABERMAS?

Mezirow shares the “transformative, metamorphosing impulse” (Brookfield, 2012, p. 131) of critical theory. However, Mezirow has been criticized for a “selective interpretation and adaptation of Habermas” (Collard & Law, 1989, p. 102) that ultimately led him to “neglect the radical impetus behind Habermas’ writings” (Hart, 1990a, p. 125). Mezirow “never fully adopted the critical theory of Habermas and this may have given traction to some of the critiques of transformative learning theory” (Fleming, 2018, p. 1).

Mezirow chose some Habermasian ideas as core concepts within his theory (mainly the different cognitive interests as domains of learning and the idea of discourse and its enabling conditions) but he ignored the role of social movements and democratization.

We would recommend that the field of transformative learning give more attention to social movements. Here are some vital research questions that have interested Habermas and that are addressed in the literature on social movements but that could benefit from the perspective of transformative learning theory: Does social movement participation transform individuals (McAdam, 1990)? How do differences among social movements change their transformational effects on individuals? For example, does the organizational structure of a movement matter? Are highly decentralized movements more or less transformational than those that are led by charismatic figures? Have social movements changed in fundamental ways, or have their defining features persisted over time (Offe, 1985; Tilly & Wood 2020)? Can online movements transform people more or less well than face-to-face varieties? Can social movements change institutions to allow more transformational learning? Or do social movements tend to conclude by making modest changes in institutions, allowing Habermasian “systems” to reproduce themselves? How can social movements avoid the traps of bureaucratization and co-optation? Are social movements being routinized and losing their transformational potential (Croizat et al., 1997)?

Relatedly, we recommend that transformative learning theory pay more attention to large-scale sociology—to the systems that have always concerned Habermas (Fleming, 2002). How are opportunities for transformative learning affected by the overall structure of a given society, and especially by the roles and relationships among the state, the market, civil society, and lifeworlds? If these relationships are not satisfactory for transformational learning, how can we change them (Brookfield, 2012)? One approach to such change is social movement activism, but it is not the only option. Political parties, elections, and legal and constitutional reform efforts are also relevant.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING AND CIVIC STUDIES

Both of us have been involved in the development of a new field—or at least a new intellectual network—called Civic Studies (Forstenzer, 2019; Levine, & Sołtan, 2014; Schröder, 2018). Its goal is to reorient the study of society and social change from questions like, “What is justice?” “What should the government do?” and “How does the society work?” to a question that puts group agency at its core: “What should we do?” That question combines values (normative judgments and arguments)

with empirical analysis of the situation and strategic choices. It generates additional questions, such as: “How should we organize ourselves into effective and durable groups?” “How should we address disagreement about values?” and “How should we detect and resolve unjust exclusions from the group that forms a ‘we’?” These questions have pragmatic significance for people who want to improve or even transform the world; they also pose theoretically complex challenges that require research and inquiry.

The focus on group agency is essential to Civic Studies, which posits that individuals are too weak and too cognitively and ethically limited to transform the world. Civic Studies intends to expand scholars’ attention from individual ethics, on one hand, and the analysis of impersonal social forces, on the other, to encompass groups of people who think and work together intentionally.

If transformational learning theory pays more attention to social movements and to large-scale sociological issues, it will move closer to Civic Studies. For its part, Civic Studies should learn from and absorb Mezirow’s insights about personal transformation. Transformative learning has not yet been a strong enough theme in Civic Studies, which has been mostly about how to organize groups and discuss values. We see much potential in the combination of these two fields.

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