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A Dialogue across Traditions of Theorizing Learning: A Panel of three pieces

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Abstract

This panel will seek to establish a dialogue about commonalities and differences between three traditions of researching adult learning. A shared framework for our discussion has been that learning is a process of change in our experience of the world around us, and that especially the processes that more profoundly change our understanding of it, and thus the framework for further experience formation, are theoretically and practically interesting. We have allowed ourselves to look out for a broader view on learning which also informs the research into work and learning, with a shared reference to approaches to learning from and within major societal crises. The three main themes are summarized by the following section titles: Views on Experience and Crisis in Researching Work and Learning; A Mind Culture and Activity Approach: Dialogic Openings on Questions of Crisis and Experience in Work and Learning; and, A Psycho-societal Approach to Experience and Learning.

Views on Experience and Crisis in Researching Work and Learning

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In this reflection on experience and crises we gather allies who from an educational perspective assist in illuminating our views so that, through learning, actions may be taken to transform unjust personal and social conditions.

John Dewey on Experience

In the midst of the global crisis of the First World War Dewey (1966) wrote *Democracy and Education*. He resisted any thinking that he believed intended merely to console, isolate or narrow the mind and wrote passionately about an education that would open minds to new concepts and ideas that would respond to the demands of actual human experience and of society. The ability to question, to reflect, to grow, to converse and to learn are key Dewey concepts and characteristic of democracy. His over-arching concern was that as many as possible of the diverse populations in the US would share in education in order to prepare people for a productive life in a fast evolving US economy.

For Dewey experience has two dimensions. First, experience is in continuity with previous experience. In pursuit of meaning we modify or integrate our new experience with previous experiences. Second, experience is in interaction with one's broader environment. Experience is created by the interaction between a person and the environment (Dewey, 1963, p. 43). Dewey (1966) defines education as "that reorganization or reconstruction of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (p. 76). The increase in meaning "corresponds to the increased perception of the connections and continuities of the activities in which we are engaged" (Dewey, 1966, pp. 76-77). Learning involves becoming aware of these interactions and continuities when researching work and learning.

Paul on Experience as Teacher and Transformative Experiences

What if experience is in interaction but not in continuity with previous experience, as Dewey suggests? What if experiences are deeply disruptive? What if those disruptive experiences put our sense of self, our very being at risk? How can we utilize our various experiences when we experience ourselves at loss or in the midst of crisis? How can we understand Dewey's idea of continuity when it comes to what Paul describes as "transformative experiences"? "Having a transformative experience teaches you something new, something you could not have known before having the experience, while also changing you as a person" (Paul, 2016, p. 17). These experiences are not *just* about change, the change is *transformative*, both in an epistemic and a personal way. In the aftermath of a transformative experience, points of views and frames of reference – in Mezirow's terms – are transformed, one's (guiding) assumptions are at stake. What transformative learning describes as a "shift in the tectonic plates of one's assumptive clusters" (Brookfield, 2000, p. 139) involves a personal dimension, "changing how you experience being who you are" (p. 17). Undergoing a transformative experience holds a learning experience, as we can adopt a new sense of self, a new way of being and living in the aftermath of crisis.

A new dimension to Dewey's notion of experience and continuity, *discontinuity*, can be added: "The inaccessibility of radically new experiences brings out the personal dimension of the fact (...) that what you can know at one time can be inaccessible to you at another time" (1963, p. 16). The discontinuity cannot only be revealed when we try to access what is already there, as an "epistemic poverty" (Paul, 2016, p. 10), we have no access to the nature of future experiences. How can we move forward being aware of the "not-knowing" (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020, p. 661) that translates into every cell of transformative experiences? According to Paul (2016), we own our future by *choosing* to undergo the *potentially transformative experience*, not because we know what our lives and our sense of self will be like afterwards, we choose the very experience itself.

Mezirow and Transformative Learning

Mezirow relies on Dewey's (1933) ideas especially on his definition of reflection as a process of "assessing the grounds (justification) for one's beliefs" (p. 9), making "unconscious assumptions explicit" (p. 281) and establishing beliefs upon a "firm basis of reason" (p. 6). Critical reflection is "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends" (Dewey in Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 5). Learning is a process of utilizing prior experience to construe new or revised interpretations of one's experiences that in turn guide action. Experience may prompt a questioning of what has been taken for granted. Transformation theory built on this: "a meaning perspective refers to the structure of cultural assumptions within which one's new experience is assimilated to – and transformed

by – one’s past experience” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 101). Mezirow (1991) offers another dimension to Paul’s (2016) epistemic and personally transformative experiences: He distinguishes epistemic, psychological and sociocultural assumptions that are transformed in the aftermath of crisis - he later expanded these to include “philosophical (world view) and aesthetic (tastes, values and judgements about what we mean by beauty) and moral ethical (moral or ethical norms) assumptions” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 17). These assumptions build what he refers to as frames of reference, which help interpret experience and dysfunctional frames of reference distort our experience.

According to Mezirow (2000) transformative learning is;

...the process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of our psychocultural assumptions has come to constrain the way in which we perceive our world, of reconstituting that structure in a way that allows us to be more inclusive and discriminating in our integrating of experience and to act on these new understandings.... (p. 22)

When frames of reference are experienced as not serving us well this may lead to a search for the genesis of these non-functioning frames; for better assumptions followed by acting on the basis of freely chosen alternatives (Mezirow, 1991). Transformed frames of reference are more inclusive; more discriminating of experience; more open; and more open to change in the future (Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

Mezirow outlines the phases of transformation (Mezirow, 2000) as:

- (1) A disorienting dilemma;
- (2) Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;
- (3) A critical assessment of assumptions;
- (4) Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
- (5) Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions;
- (6) Planning a course of action;
- (7) Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans;
- (8) Provisional trying new roles;
- (9) Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;
- (10) A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspectives. (p. 22)

The experience of work provides many opportunities for transformative learning. Adult students present dilemmas from their work lives that suggest the possibility of a transformative learning opportunity. Which job should one apply for? How to deal in a confident and assertive way with issues at work (bullying, injustices, work assessments or organizational changes), and for so many this question: how can I manage the demands of work in a balanced way considering work-life balance and/or childcare responsibilities? These dilemmas can be experienced as crises. As such they are opportunities for transformative learning in which much gets redefined including ones identity as a worker, colleague, parent or citizen. Negt’s work will help us focus the researcher’s gaze on a more critical (dialectical) view of experience.

Oskar Negt on the Dialectic of Experience

Oskar Negt works collaboratively with Kluge and his main interests include work as a source of identity and dignity; critical pedagogy for adults and schools; and politics. He (2008)

explicitly addresses worker (adult) education (Langston, 2020). The experience of workers (learners) (Kluge & Negt, 2014) is infused with the contradictions and crises of capitalist society and acts as a source of "resistance to capitalism" (p. 31). His concept of exemplary learning sets out how to work with experience by bringing a *sociological imagination* to bear to understanding these issues and foster social action. For Negt philosophy aims at the "practical transformation of the existing social conditions" (Habermas, 1981, p. 469) and offers a vision of the world as it might be. Critical theorists are aware of the perceived faultlines (even contradictions) between a world that seems to resist real change and a critical perspective that offers a counter to political systems that pretend to be democratic while 'tacitly continuing the totalitarianism it ostensibly opposes' (Jay, 2020, p. 136). Even the powerful American democracy seems to struggle with its democratic impulses (Applebaum, 2020). In this great experiment, noble ideals meet a bleak reality. Jay continues to raise the possibility that irony will no longer suffice (2020, 139) and seeks to search for the indignation that fuels irony. Recently, Axel Honneth (Fassin & Honneth, 2022) addresses the complexities of the current situation. Crises cannot be both the new normal and also a rupture of what is normal (Fassin & Honneth, 2022). The temporality of crisis raises the issue of the designation of a crisis that leads to making connections with previous crises, dreams and expectations. This impacts on the experience of current crisis – things could have been different. In turn this gives shape to what the crisis comes to be, how it is addressed and the ways it impacts on the future. These interactions are dialectically interconnected – they are "simultaneously socially produced and socially productive" (Fassin & Honneth, 2022, p. 8). The challenge is to maintain hope in the promises of a critical perspective however much they are denied or dismantled and in the process obstinately reach to a better future.

The experience of crisis is not just an individual experience as the "public domain of the jointly inhabited interior of our lifeworld is at once inside and outside" (Habermas, 2008, p. 14). The inside/outside dichotomy is misleading and even in the most personal moments our consciousness thrives on the "impulses it receives from the cultural network of public, symbolically expressed, and intersubjectively shared categories, thoughts and meanings" (Habermas, 2008, p. 15). It is difficult to imagine a stronger statement than this of the false dichotomy of individual and social. This informs our view. The personal is indeed political; the political is also personal and learning from experience necessarily involves making these connections. Learning and research require an ability to perceive the world in this connected way. It is this insight (borrowed from Hegel) that, overall, moves this project towards a critical model of researching work and learning (Fleming, 2021). Negt is under no illusion about the difficulties of such learning and Kluge's recent book title captures this difficulty saying that political and social change is like slow and powerful *Drilling through hard boards* (Kluge, 2017).

This reconfiguring of how one's individual problems are dialectically connected with broader social issues is significant. It makes understanding the nature of one's problem or dilemmas and the search for solutions more complex than understood by Mezirow (1991). Indeed, without the dialectical dimension, this relationship is misconstrued. One cannot speak properly of individual experience unless it is connected to broader social issues. His idea of learning involves workers analysing and interpreting social situations to understand the causes of their current situation and to inform social actions.

Negt's pedagogy involves exercising learners' sociological imagination so that both their lived experiences and the possibilities that may emerge are (re)imagined. What he calls exemplary learning is connected to the interests of learners; connects the experiences of

learners with broader social issues and is relevant for emancipation (Negt, 1971, p. 97). Learning is a collective journey of self-determination that includes taking political and emancipatory actions. This pushes learning theory into social and political arenas, and this Negt-inspired critical pedagogy provides a framework for an historical and material interpretation of experience as produced by the capitalist system as well as a source for a new social order that will be just and caring (Kluge & Negt, 2014). In our view on experience we recall that Negt and Kluge (1993) assert that experience is the most important thing that workers actually produce (p. xlviii).

In a world where workers seem to be more passive (compared with the heady days of organized labour unions – especially across Europe) Honneth wonders whether their defiance has only become less visible or whether their resistance has been translated into alternative modes of resistance to the system – by “positively developing local cultures of respect or by developing cultures of misbehaviour, in both cases critiquing contemporary capitalism” (Fassin & Honneth, 2022, p. 8).

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A Mind Culture and Activity Approach – Dialogic Openings on Questions of Crisis and Experience in Work and Learning

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As opposed to other leading considerations of learning, crisis and experience, why embark on a consideration of the Vygotskian Project, specifically a dialectical theory of MCA? In the context of work and political economy, what might it offer?

A Mind, Culture and Activity Approach to Work, Learning and Crisis

The Vygotskian Project is an umbrella term commonly used to recognize Lev Vygotsky's seminal contributions that set the stage for an array of subsequent sub-traditions beginning with the creation of a recognizable theory of 'activity' in the 1930s (A.N. Leontiev) and expanding in a host of ways since. Building upon the foundations alluded to, in turn, an MCA approach can be summarized beginning with a definition of 'activity' as the minimal, meaningful unit of analysis for understanding the mutually constituting, yet contradictory, dimensions of practice as they unfold *and* become transformed over time: "Activity is a molar, not an additive unit of the life of the physical, material subject, [...] a unit of life, [...] a system that has structure, its own internal transitions and transformations, its own development" (Leontiev 1978, p. 50). Understood in this way, activity is the concrete form that practice actually takes (as you and I carry out our lives). From this perspective, it becomes impossible to understand the moments and dimensions of learning in isolation from the patterns of social, political, economic and historical relationships that constitute them, and become, each, transformed over time. Yet it remains the case that, from an MCA perspective, individual learners are not simply in *direct and im-mediate* communion with society, or culture, or political economy as a whole. Rather, this communion is *mediated*.

Thus, a key point of emphasis of the MCA approach is the principle of *mediation*. Activities mediate relations of person to world. And, within activity people always act on (and are acted upon), think about, feel, perceive and know the world vis-à-vis activity as mediated by tools (things a person uses to act upon the world) and artifacts (things through which the world acts upon the person). These mediating tools/artefacts include an enormous range of items: from physical objects and technologies to spatial or temporal properties of the environment; from language, narrative, and non-narrative aspects of discourse or ideology to organizational rules, divisions of labour, or norms; from specific cognitive or affective schema to desires, fears, taboos, or other elements commonly associated with personality, subjectivity, or identity. What is more, such tools/artifacts, of course, have a history of production themselves and as such none can be considered culturally, politically or economically divested. Tool/artifact mediation, in other words, helps us describe the real living history we encounter, reconfigure, and otherwise make (but never simply as we please).

Never simply ‘as we please’, to paraphrase Marx, is a reference to an MCA’s treatment of learning and agency, and it is a theme best exemplified by one of the earliest (Vygotskian) observations about the nature of mediated agency: the dynamic of ‘double stimulation’. The mediations of double stimulation can be summarized as the processes through which people resolve contradictions in their learning lives in activity. Presented with an initial stimulus—a contradiction (large or small)—learners appropriate or create a tool and invests it with suitable meaning (second stimulus), and then use it to mediate their practices in an attempt to resolve the contradiction. Of course, with repeated cycles of engagement in activity, a learner’s understanding and capacity to resolve the contradiction increases. The result is that both the situation and the learner are transformed.

This brings me to the notion of transformation and ‘crisis’. The MCA dynamics of double stimulation explain the transformation of crises (small and large). It is true that crisis is a word ripe for abuse, but here, as elsewhere in these panel presentations, it is spoken of as an object of learning analysis with special attention to the workplace. Given its contradictions, capitalist work is not likely to be a perpetually re-inventing form of activity destined to last forever and a day. And if that’s true, from an MCA perspective, understanding a crisis in work and learning must be understood as a certain moment of the core contradictions of capitalism taking shape in the mind, culture and activity of people. These contradictions “pulling in opposite directions [place] constant, if not even or always evident, pressure on events. The uneasy equilibrium that results lasts until [...] a contradiction becomes bigger, sharper, more explosive” (Ollman 1993, pp.51-52). However, actually analyzing genuine *crisis and transformation* in relation to learning in activity is, as Ollman (1987, p71) remarked on the study of class consciousness, like “trying to catch a wave at the moment when it breaks”.

I suggest that MCA offers unique opportunities for assessing the ocean swells and catching the breaking of such waves. It’s a perspective in which neither the learning subject, the outside world, nor the constellations of mediating tools/artifacts in activity are presumed to be politically or economically dis-interested. From an MCA perspectives, problems—from those that are small, practical and resolvable to those that are personally, organizationally, nationally or globally immiserating—are each and all central to the concept of dialectical contradiction in activity.

‘Experience’ in Workplace Learning – A Cross-Road for Dialogue

Building on the specifics that have been summarized above, I can now consider how an MCA approach treats ‘experience’ and the interesting parallels, overlaps and fissures that appear when compared to the other traditions discussed in our panel.

In Eschenbacher and Fleming’s unique, critical Transformative Learning (EF-TL) approach, we see that Dewey’s formulation of experience and learning forms something of a foundation of interpretation of discontinuity/crisis (Paul) and transformation (Mezirow). Positioning Dewey as a shared spring-board to dialogue, MCA can be placed in a new light. In fact, a number of scholars have written convincingly about the overlaps between Vygotsky, the Vygotskian Project and Dewey. And, so too are there distinctions to be observed. From an MCA perspective Cole (1995, 1996) writes of the “relatively abstract” treatment of the “particular morphologies of particular practices” (1995, p.112) found in Dewey. However, as one turns to EF-TL, as we can see the development upon this foundation through the use of Paul and Mezirow, we see evidence of the narrowing of this fissure. What happens if “disruptive experiences put our sense of self, our very being at risk?” Double stimulation is,

in my view, highly applicable to a study of both discontinuity/crisis (first stimulus) and transformation (second stimulus). Brought together in this fashion, double stimulation offers an account of the particularities of everyday experience (as a feature of activity), including those experiences, such as in so much of one's work life, which are not pedagogically mediated.

Of course, it can be seen that the Psycho-Societal (P-S) approach shares certain insights with the EF-TL approach in terms of the Frankfurt Critical Theory traditions. However, in considering the P-S approach to learning and experience directly, I feel we find a different set of possibilities, and limits. P-S is an approach that argues, in attending to “how subjectivity is constituted as concrete relations, we need to interpret individual subjective reactions and consciousness in the context of culture, and this is where life history interpretation enters the picture” (Salling Olesen 2007, p.45). In these terms it might be said that, as a thoroughly socialized conception of experience, a P-S approach (and likely the EF-TL approach to assumptive clusters as well) offers a highly textured account of the (individual-societal) unconscious. Through its share concern for dialectics of learning, change and experience, MCA shares these preoccupations.

This brings us to the problem of the ‘missing mediator’. What do I mean by this? As Salling Olesen writes of the P-S approach, “the individual is an embodied version of society, with a version of experience of its social order and culture, its contradictions, opportunities, and taboos”, and, as regards political economy, that “our minds, rationality and desires are shaped by capitalism” (p.5). I claim this is also a general point of overlap across EF-TL, P-S and MCA approaches. However, in drawing on dialectical thought (with special attention to Hegel's syllogisms in *Logic*), when understood as a question of learning and experience, the type of MCA approach I refer to argues that the dialectical relation of the individual and society is always to be understood as mediated by the particularities of activity (see Sawchuk 2019). That is, it is the limits and pressures of *a specific constellation of mediations* (of activity) that define the actual potentialities of, for example, the societal unconscious or the individual/societal dialectic in general. In this regard, it seems to me that such notions could still benefit from concepts, such as activity, double stimulation and so on, along the road to establishing more detailed and above all more particularistic appreciations of the mediators between the individual and the universal phenomena of work and learning analysis.

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A Psycho-societal Approach to Experience and Learning Henning Salling Olesen, Roskilde University

Crises as disruptions

The idea of discussing differences and similarities between different traditions' understanding of learning processes through their conceptualization of crises came upon us in the wake of COVID19 and against the background of the slow development of cognition around an increasingly clear ecological crisis (climate crisis). These crises can be seen as real-time pedagogical experiments. The striking differences in people's reactions and processes of cognition in relation to the two crises immediately raise questions about what is decisive for which learning processes take place. Not least, the question of why some experiences seem to give rise to collective realizations while others almost seem to be repressed or reduced to "the usual", the well-known, is of great general interest in understanding the dynamics between individual and collective realization.

For me, this problem formulation has received an unwelcome duplication: While I was writing this paper - a fairly simple task in an inspiring and motivating context - another crisis has dominated my outlook: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has converted a fairly integrated practical understanding of global political problems into an active analytical and practical commitment: I have been involved in a civic movement which, in opposition to the militancy in the western response to Russia, seeks to set another agenda that we call sustainable security policy. Our perspective has not been academic but practical-political - but the analysis has much in common with a psycho-societal approach to learning.

If we more generally regard crises as collective or societal disruptions they cause a double disturbance: on the one hand, our understanding of reality is challenged, on the other hand, our usual everyday practice is blocked. The two disturbances have different subjective status but are interconnected. Although we are all relatively peripheral agents in a process where the opportunities to act individually are limited, we feel hit, our entire subjective life is activated in the forms of compassion, anxiety, and desire to "do something". The responses are depending on how this disturbance is perceived and interpreted but also on the possible agency. Possible learning processes may lead to a reconstruction of the world view that has been disturbed. But first of all it must enable us to "get on with our lives", repair the everyday practice that is being blocked. Without going too far into the current war situation individual perceptions of security in for example the Danish population can be interpreted as a result of the entire political object-subject-object-dialectic of the war – it is forcefully affected but it is also a factor in the political process – e.g., the escalation potential is constituted by the "sum of" individual experiences. What durable learning this process will leave is still open, but it is quite clear that the situation is rich with learning potentials. Perhaps the alternative between learning or non-learning needs to be reformulated into the question *what is being learned*, which must again be understood in relation to macro-societal practical consequences.

If we compare with the two different global crises, the COVID19 crisis and the climate crisis, the individual is also to a large extent a "victim" or object of external dynamics. There are material realities at work but also in these cases the subjective experience is in many ways mediated by "expert knowledge" and political action. The learning processes of these crises can hardly be said to have been completed yet but in both cases they are about the vulnerability of our entire life situation and the role of state and community in handling what is seen as *external* threats. But they play out differently.

IN the case of the COVID19 crisis there is no doubt that there have been violent processes of cognition and emotional reaction. Immediate anxiety plays a major role and individual vulnerability becomes the focal point of a strong desire to be helped by experts. Most often this subjective delegation has resulted in an authoritarian relationship to “the system” (government/experts/politicians) and “people”, oscillating between the demand to be saved (vaccination) and the demand to maintain individual autonomy (resistance to lockdowns), but ultimately seeking restoration of the situation before the pandemic.

The in principle the greater threat posed by the climate crisis is more intangible - this crisis immediately seems to be “inflicted” on us by experts who point out that we have an existential, collective threat. Lately it seems to acquire a subjective reality character. Concern for the state of the planet has become a consensus framework in the political public in Europe and is gradually arousing existential anxieties to many people. But the heated discussion about whether climate change is man-made shows that the emotional significance of the climate crisis is more related to the question of how the crisis will constrain individual practice (should we take individual responsibility or is it a matter for experts and COP conferences?).

IF, What and How people learn from the experience of these crisis situations is an empirical question. However, the different characteristics of the crises as outlined give us some clues to understand how different crises have different learning process potentials (Salling Olesen et al., 2021). But also that learning processes in and of crises are not simple imprints of the nature of the crisis. They are subjective reactions on the basis of life experiences, feelings and hopes, and (re)orientation of a life prospect. And these individual processes are mediated in a social (political) process. My loose description of the conditions indicates dimensions in the understanding of the relationship between external reality, experience and learning processes. Without giving them generic status, they can be seen to indicate a psycho-social approach to learning.

In many ways this approach has its origins in Oskar Negt's old conception of experiential learning. Negt's argument in this early book launched an entirely new didactic thinking: that political education can only succeed by supporting learning from the concrete everyday experience of *being a worker* identifying its contradictions that may be the seeds for learning – not the disruption, but the stone in the shoe – if they are reflected through relevant societal theory. Today it seems obvious that a theory of class consciousness extrapolating from *traditional industrial workers* life is obsolete. But exactly the notion of experience sets the frame for an opening and differentiation in relation to social context (not only work life and wage labour experience) and learner (working class differentiated and life experience is differentiated). I think one can see this notion of experience as a precursor for the elaboration of a non-structuralist version of a Marxist framework understanding basic societal relations of capitalism and wage labour in most people's life world but also the historical dimension of social reality (Negt & Kluge, 2014).

The idea of political learning exploring the latent utopian aspects in the life world can be seen as the flip side of the negative dialectic in the Frankfurt School critique of positivist social science. For the theory of *political learning* it is a decisive point that the potential for change is endogenous, a potential in historically given materiality, not an exogenous theoretical input from a teacher or a political elite. By insisting on a principle of endogeneity, this critical tradition maintains a strictly materialist ontology while paying respect to the power of intellectual work and the dialectic between social reality and human learning. Marxism is

transformed into a theory of social learning. Negt and Kluge here provide a decisive development in Marxist theory because it also entails a theory of *the development of human potential*, i.e. subjective drivers in civilisation.

Psychodynamic dimensions of Social Learning

However, there is a blatant need for theorizing of this subjective dimension of societal processes. And this is where the most distinctive contribution of a psycho-societal approach to learning comes in, seeking to establish an integrated social and psychodynamic understanding of the interaction and learning, and connecting the dynamics in learning processes with the social life experiences of the learners. Even social learning must be understood in the ontogenetic dimension, the development of subjectivity in an individual's life. The challenge for a theory of experiential learning is to understand the dialectic between societal circumstances and the subjective dynamic of individual (and even potentially collective) learning. Reminding us that this is a situated and specific process the psycho-societal approach is first of all a methodological approach. It is an amalgamation between a Life history method and a psychoanalytically informed hermeneutics in which principles of psychoanalysis – simultaneous attention, free association, and the concepts of transfer and counter-transfer – are applied in social and cultural interpretive practice (Salling Olesen & Leithäuser, 2018). Seeing learning as a cognitive and emotional reconfiguration of a world view – situated, practical and scenic product of life experiences – this hermeneutic method seeks to trace the dynamics of this reconfiguration in language use and in everyday life behaviour.

A decisive methodological and theoretical inspiration was provided by Alfred Lorenzer, a psychiatrist who took an early interest in societal critique and cultural theory based on the Frankfurt School. His interpretation method is particularly interesting because is underpinned by a theory of the mediation of individual sensory and emotional interaction experience and societal meanings through the learning of language (Lorenzer, 1972). Lorenzer coined the key concept of “interaction forms” for the infant’s inner, pre-linguistic experiences of practices and relations. These interaction forms are later connected with the socially recognized language to form *symbolic interaction forms*, establishing the human capacity for connecting (societal) knowledge in its performative form as language use and (bodily, individual) sensory experience. Lorenzer adopted the theory of language games from the works of Ludwig. Language games embedded in concrete social practices in a dialectic unit of language use, everyday life practice and world view (Weber, 2010). Language games are thus defined as the interface at which subjective and objective (cultural) structures are entangled and mediate the relationship between specific individuals and societal culture. Approached in this way, language and consciousness are inseparably linked with social practice. In the context of learning, this means that both the original link between interaction forms, social practice and language, and the lifelong capacity to build new and revise such links is at the core of learning capacity. I think this *material* link between emotional life experiences and the role of language in social knowledge is generic for understanding learning throughout life as integrated practical, emotional and cognitive processes

The societal unconscious

Besides theorizing learning, we can add an epistemological perspective: in critical dialogue with constructivist social science, we can realize that knowledge is not only linguistic or cultural phenomena, “discourses”, but material realities embodied in individual dispositions and in social practices. Language use, whether in literary works, field notes or excerpts from interviews, comprises a multi-layered scene of conscious and unconscious meaning. Just like

the conscious level, the unconscious level is a result of life-history experience of social interaction. For the same reason, the unconscious is assumed to contain potential for social imagination that goes beyond the actual state of consciousness – either because it contains interaction experiences that have later been excluded from consciousness, or because it contains anticipating ideas of something “emerging” that has not yet been realized in social practice (Salling Olesen, 2020).

Learning from Crises?

It brings us back to learning in and of crises. The nature of crises as a collapse of the social order and thus a threat to the human lifeworld can, on the one hand, result in defensive attempts to restore cognitive and emotional security. This can be done through group processes with authoritarian leaders who claim to be able and willing to restore security. Or it can sometimes lead to learning processes that open a new order and new practice opportunities - either by virtue of a reflective learning process that reconfigures the understanding of the background of the crisis - and / or by virtue of opening new practice opportunities that transcend its blocking influence. Whether and when one or the other happens is both a result of the nature and origin of the crisis, but also of the life experiences it plays into, and other factors that are present as conditions for the subjective recognition emotional and practical significance of the crisis. Together with a colleague, I analyzed the Danish government's pandemic management as an interplay between the anxiety potential of the crisis and the custodial care that is characteristic of the Scandinavian / Social Democratic welfare state (Lading & Salling Olesen, 2022).

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