**Mezirow’s Theory of Transformative Learning and Critical Theory:**

**Oskar Negt and his Reconstruction of Experience**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores key ideas from the critical theory of Oskar Negt that address critiques of Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning. The implications of Negt’s work on the dialectical nature of experience and the connections between experience, social structures and social change are identified. Dewey and Mezirow build on the importance of experience for learning. Mezirow’s work is re-framed in order to work toward a critical theory of transformative learning – that he commenced (1981). Exemplary learning and competences, as described by Negt, also help make transformation theory more cognisant of the perceived missing social dimension in Mezirow’s work.

**Key words**: Experience, Exemplary Learning, Adult Education, Oskar Negt

Climate change, mass migrations, Covid-19 and other crises have provided a challenging environment for the theory of transformative learning (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). Since its first publication (Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Marsick, 1978) it continues, in spite of many critiques, to be a theory in progress (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow borrowed concepts from Jürgen Habermas in order to build a theoretical base for the theory (Mezirow, 1981). Following recent developments in critical theory by Axel Honneth, work has been undertaken to identify the implications of Honneth’s work for a critical theory of transformative learning (Fleming, 2016). The implications for transformation theory of more recent iterations of critical theory by Oskar Negt are outlined here.

Collard and Law (1989) and Clarke and Wilson (1991) critique transformation theory as overly concerned with individual change. Newman (1994) asserts that Mezirow’s theory was stripped of its potential for social transformation. Others have identified a certain ‘stuckness’ in the theory as critiques are repeated without adding to the debate (Hoggan, et al., 2017, p. 49).

These studies prompted clarifications and further development of the theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996, 2000). Mezirow (1997) spells out the connection between transformation and social action by recommending that learners be helped to analyse their common problems through participatory research, discover options for social action and develop the ability to work with others in order to take social action (p. 61). Mezirow (1997) always draws a distinction between fostering critically reflective learning and fostering social action (p. 61). These comments complicate the process of developing a critical theory of transformative learning.

Mezirow saw his work contributing to a critical theory of adult learning (Mezirow, 1981) and utilized concepts from Habermas for this purpose: domains of learning (instrumental, interpersonal and emancipatory); critical reflection and discourse. Habermas provided a ready-made model for the kinds of conversations Mezirow suggested would facilitate transformative learning. Unfortunately, Mezirow (1981) also argues that;

As educators, we need not concern ourselves with the philosophical question of whether Habermas has succeeded in establishing the epistemological status of the primary knowledge-constitutive interests with categorically distinct object domains, types of experience and corresponding forms of inquiry. (p. 72)

This approach means that Mezirow did not utilizing other potentially useful concepts from Habermas including the demise of the public sphere; the lifeworld; and the capacity of civil society to become a location for decolonizing the lifeworld. This approach gives traction to some critiques of transformation theory and an inability to effectively address these critiques.

**Transformative Learning**

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)

The first step towards transformation is experiencing a disorienting dilemma when a problem is experienced with well-established ways of making meaning. Even in the earliest work Mezirow (1981; Mezirow & Marsick, 1978) 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;

1. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions;
2. Planning a course of action;
3. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans;
4. Provisional trying new roles;
5. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;
6. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspectives. (p. 22)

The theory of transformative learning has developed in a number of directions and its progress can be followed in the proceedings of this and previous conferences (ITLA, 2022)

**Oskar Negt the Critical Theorist**

The Frankfurt School for Social research was formed at the Goethe University in the 1920s. It engages in an interdisciplinary study of how capitalism and injustices in society can be explained and it identifies possible ways of taking emancipatory actions. Critical theory aims at the practical transformation of existing social conditions. Their critiques offer a vision of a world as it might be or ought to be.

Oskar Negt(b. 1934) studied philosophy and sociology with Horkheimer and Adorno, was an assistant to Habermas from 1962, and since his student days was an orthodox Marxist and active supporter of social democracy. He continues as a prominent scholar at Leibnitz University Hannover that Illeris (2002) asserts is an ‘extension of the Frankfurt School’ (p. 147). Oskar Negt (2016, 2019) is unique among critical theorists and Frankfurt School scholars having published his autobiography (Grama, 2020). Negt is driven by the identical concerns of the other Frankfurt School members who address the question of how Nazi Germany emerged and his resulting commitment to democracy leads him to work theoretically and pedagogically in support of more democratic societies. ‘Democracy is the only politically conceived social order that has to be learned, over and over, every day, into old age’ as a ‘process of education and learning’ (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 452). These ideas are gaining traction in adult education (Finnegan, 2022; Fleming, 2021). Negt is a prolific writer on a wide range of topics including philosophy, sociology and organization theory; is active in journalism and the media; and works closely with Alexander Kluge, an award winning movie and TV producer (see Kluge, 2020). Negt’s main interests include work as a source of identity and dignity (and injustice); critical pedagogy for adults and schools (as a source for his social theory, emancipatory learning and action); and politics.

His focus is on the experiences of work as a positive factor in workers’ identities and as the starting point for learning and creating social theory. The experience of learners (Kluge & Negt, 2014) is infused with the contradictions of capitalist society and their experience is a source of ‘resistance to capitalism’ (p. 31). His concept of exemplary learning uses these experiences and with sociological imagination he works to understand these issues and take social action to alter the condition of workers. His colleague, Stollman, writes that ‘the rallying cry for Negt and Kluge’s work is no longer “Workers of the world, unite!” but rather “Experiences of the world, unite!”’ (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 464). In a rare excursion into adult learning theory by a Frankfurt School associate Negt (1975, 2008) outlines his view of exemplary learning.

**Dewey and Experience**

Experience is important for both Dewey and transformation theory and this aspect of Negt’s work is crucial for constructing a critical theory of transformative leaerning. The early phases of the process of transformation that start with a disorienting dilemma deal with experience: of disorientation, of fear, of anxiety, and of identifying one’s problem with broader social issues. Negt transcends the limited view of experience taken by Dewey (Illeris, 2002) and by Mezirow.

For Dewey experience has two dimensions. First, experience is in continuity with previous experience. In pursuit of meaning we modify or integrate new experience with previous experience. Transformation theory builds 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). Second, experience is in interaction with one’s broader environment. Experience is created by this interaction (Dewey, 1963, p. 43). Frames of reference help interpret experience and dysfunctional frames of reference may distort experience. Dewey (1966) defines education as the ‘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 interactionsand continuities.

According to Negt the experiences that are continuities and interactions are dialectical. This is a new understanding of experience that has implications for transformative learning. Though Mezirow (Mezirow, 1978, p. 101) hints at this dialectical interaction, the interaction between individual experiences and the environment is now dialectical. This fundamentally alters our understanding of transformative learning and goes beyond Dewey’s understanding of experience. Transformative learning involves not just an integration or reconstruction of experience but understands that the continuities and interactions are dialectical. The phases of transformative learning must be reinterpreted. From Mezirow to Hoggan, et al. (2017) the dialectical nature of experience is missing. This, to me, is a form of ‘stuckness’ in transformation theory beyond that to which these authors (Hoggan et al., 2017, pp. 50-54) refer and this dialectical turn avoids the false dichotomies of the social and personal aspects of transformative learning.

One step in the phases of transformation involves understanding how one’s individual experience is related to broader social issues. In light of Negt’s work, experience is in dialectical relationship with its broader social context. One’s individual situation cannot be properly understood without seeing these social connections as dialectical. The political and personal are connected – dialectically (Honneth, 1995). The political is personal - dialectically. The assertion that transformation theory lacks a social dimension actually misconstrues the situation. The problem is entirely different. Individual problems are not just connected with broader social issues but these connections are dialectical. This makes the process of understanding the nature of one’s problem and the search for solutions more complex. Relating an individual problem to broader social issues is not just an interesting add-on (or a missing dimension) but an essential dimension of understanding experience. Without this dialectical dimension the relationship between experience and environment is misconstrued, as is the connection between one’s current experience and previous experience.

Mezirow was aware that relying on Dewey’s understanding of adult critical reflection was problematic, yet he borrows the useful parts of a theory without adopting the entire understanding. Dialectical understandings are central to critical theory. Negt is helpful for illuminating aspects of Mezirow’s theory that have been insufficiently or uncritically or partially conceptualized.

This allows us address one of the persistent critiques of transformation theory - that Mezirow has not properly integrated the personal and social aspects of learning in his published works. Mezirow ignored aspects of Habermas that could have addressed this problem when he (Mezirow) borrowed selectively from critical theory (Fleming, 2002). In critical theory individual experience is connected to broader social issues. I propose that the action one takes as an important and final phase of the process of transformative learning is a dialectically interconnected set of actions at personal and social levels. These ideas are not new in European adult education. Illeris (2002) credits Salling Olesen with borrowing this from Negt in 1989.

**Oskar Negt the Adult Educator**

Negt, uniquely among critical theorists, builds an education theory around these ideas. Even if learners are not aware of these ideas, real relations and connections are only properly revealed when they are interpreted as dialectic. Quoting Hegel, Negt and Kluge (2016) write that:

The dialectical movement, which consciousness performs on itself, both on its knowledge as well as on its object, in so far as the new, true object emerges from consciousness from this movement is in fact what is known as experience. (p. 5).

Negt’s contribution to adult education includes exemplary learning and societal competencies that he worked out in the context of emancipatory trade union and worker education. In collaborations between folk schools and unions he developed the underlying theory of his work and relevant teaching methods and materials. He (Negt, 1975) goes beyond the teaching of skills and competencies and emphasizes the important pedagogical idea of understanding ‘workers existence as a social problem’ (p. 4). It involves workers analysing their social situation, interpreting it in order to understand the causes of their current situation and thus inform actions to change it. Negt focusses on developing an emancipatory and transformative theory of worker education and a corresponding teaching manual. He (1975) developed ‘an immediate self-evident connection between the emancipatory objectives of the labour movement and a theory that would underpin it scientifically’ (p. 18).

He studies how learners experience their lives, how to understand human misery and take action to change the social situation that causes this misery. This involves an exercise in sociological imagination so that the lived experiences of learners and the possibilities that may emerge are re-imagined. He (1975) calls this exemplary learning - learning connected to the interests of the learners. It connects experiences of learners with broader social issues and is ‘relevant for their emancipation’ (p. 97). This is clearly linked with transformation theory, but with an added, integrated social dimension. Transformative learning is not just about an individual accumulating knowledge or learning. It is necessarily a collective journey of self-determination and a process of political and emancipatory actions.

Unlike transformation theory, Negt proposes a curriculum or list of competences that are essential for exemplary learning. The competences as Negt (2010, pp. 218-234) calls them, are these six: Identity competence; historical competence; social justice (or awareness) competence; technological competence; ecological competence and economic competence. His curriculum links the learners’ individual experiences (including misrecognitions and injustices) with broader social issues; investigates and explores the interconnections in order to see how individual experiences and structural issues in the social environment are connected - dialectically. For example, the experiences behind the Black Lives Matter movement’s objections to police brutality are connected to systemic, historical, economic racism and slavery – forms of systematic/social/historical misrecognitions undermining individual and social self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. The learning involved is meta-learning and along with dialectical thinking are of ‘fundamental importance for exemplary learning’ (Negt, 1993, p. 661).

Negt (1975) describes adult learning as an analysis of learners’ experiences including their working and living conditions in order to bring into awareness the historical development of how their interests are defined for them and how relationships of power are experienced. This is done in order that they can become aware of their roles in their current situation and through a critical study identify options, including actions that will change the unjust reality. In contrast to transformation theory’s rather tame political direction, this learning process nudges transformation theory into the social and political arena. This Kluge and Negt version of learning provides a framework for an historical and material interpretation of subjectivity which is produced by capitalist systems as well as a source for a new social order that will be just and caring (Kluge & Negt, 1981). It is a critical theory of transformation theory.

Negt’s education goes beyond views of education that involve concepts of personal growth and development that may lead to fitting into the social and democratic structures of the current world. Negt outlines ways in which experience itself is modified by social structures. When we understand how experience is influenced by social structures there is then the possibility of what both Paulo Freire and Maxine Greene call break-through moments. These moments can help engage the sociological imagination in a process of social transformation (Negt, 1975; Negt & Kluge, 2016). Illeris connects these views with Mezirow’s theory.

These ideas are not new to adult educators such as Olesen (1989), Wildemeersch (1992) and Illeris (2002). Olesen (1989), quoting Negt, sees ‘experience as a collective process because when we experience as individuals we also do so through a socially structured consciousness’ (p. 8) and again ‘the socialized individual cannot experience individually’ (p. 68). The individual is always multiple, or as Brecht calls it – ‘the self is always plural’ or dividual (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 45). A critical theory of transformative learning is not only possible but by taking seriously the foundational impulses of critical theory from Habermas, Honneth and now Negt there is not only the reality of a theory in progress but a transformation theory in process of becoming what Jack Mezirow worked toward – a critical theory of learning.

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