

Adult education in times of crisis and change: perspectives on access, learning careers and identities

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Chapter 1

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Toward a transformative pedagogy of crises and experience

Introduction: Crises and Experience

Crisis and human experience are central to adult life and adult learning. The uncertainty, the wondering and the perplexity brought about by crises provide the experiences that lead to learning, even transformative learning. According to Dewey (1910) perplexity is 'the guiding factor in the entire process of reflection' (p. 19). The added urgency of current crises may short circuit thinking especially critical thinking. A crisis means that the learning is urgent. A great deal is at stake—maybe everything.

We may have lost what was previously taken for granted, including formerly unproblematic notions of health, freedom of movement, safety, or lifestyle. Crises today have individual, societal and even global dimensions. It is useful to see crises today as a defining experience of this time in history. Freire asserts that epochal themes indicate limit situations. It appears that the themes of crisis and experience may be what he means by 'epochal themes' that function as limit situations and, by implication, opportunities to learn (Freire, 1972, p. 73). A crisis suggests a turning point or at least a

situation where normal frames of reference are disrupted; do not function as we wish, and when new actions must be taken soon. The challenge in these moments may be to bring about both self-transformation and social change—to think new thoughts triggered by perplexities that may unsettle fixed positions personally and socially. These experiences may provide learning opportunities and call for transformation, 'rethinking deeply held, and often distorted beliefs, about who we are and our lifeworld' (Finnegan, 2019, p. 46). Limit situations (Freire, 1972) invite us to go beyond, to imagine and learn to identify hidden forces, submerged realities and overcome prescribed endings and closed solutions, to imagine, to reflect on present experiences and create breakthrough moments (Greene, 1973) that shatter sedimented thinking. When the very ability to learn is challenged, as in the current crises, we struggle to imagine learning as offering transformative possibilities.

In this chapter, crises and experience are explored as opportunities for learning transformatively. In this journey the allies are John Dewey in particular, along with Jack Mezirow as the transformative learning scholar. But the principal source of understanding is the German critical theorist and transformative pedagogy scholar Oskar Negt. The title *transformative pedagogy* is used here as a way of bringing together his critical theory contributions and his adult education contributions as an active workers education practitioner. The experience of workers and Negt's own experience as an activist are brought together in his transformative pedagogy.

Crisis: Habermas and Dewey

In working towards an understanding of crisis, it is appropriate to turn to Jürgen Habermas who identifies new stages of individual and social development that leads to new levels of learning. New knowledge and learning to bring new problem situations, new risks, and burdens. Habermas (1974), in a prescient moment, asserts that:

as natural scientific medicine brings a few diseases under control, there arises a consciousness of contingency in relation to all illness... Suffering from the contingencies of an uncontrolled process gains a new quality to the extent that we believe ourselves capable of rationally intervening in it. The suffering is then the negative of a new need... (p. 164). Though we may now face new and existential crises (for example, climate change) experiences of crises are not new. Habermas (1995), in a moment of typical idealism, asserts that the world faced the crises of the twentieth century with 'enlightened perplexity' (p. ZB4). However, he soon reverted to a more mundane confidence when he wrote about 'learning from catastrophe' as part of coping with the damage done to social cohesion by the crises he identified then as the 'dismantling of the welfare state' and 'superpowers gone wild' (Habermas, 2001, p. 47). This Marx inspired understanding of the crises of capitalism is important but not sufficient for the present moment. There is more to present disorientations than this economic perspective permits.

Learning utilises prior experience to construe new or revised interpretations of experience that in turn guide action. Experience, especially of crises, may prompt a questioning of what has been taken for granted. As disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1978) or 'perplexity' (Dewey, 1910, p. 19) are the beginning of learning, I suggest that today crises motivate learning. Crises act as disorienting dilemmas, as starting points for transformative learning. As the horizon of meanings available to people may be distorted or the range of meanings available as people attempt to make meaning are too often infused with conspiracy theories and resistance to the knowledge of scientific enquiry, there is a distortion in the lifeworld that complicates a critical thinking through of these issues. Crisis is best understood when it is both a personal and social experience. I want to focus on current experiences as the starting point for learning. This connection with experience is the major ingredient in this search for a transformative pedagogy of crises and experience.

Experience is a key ingredient of learning and 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 concept of experiential learning is now taken for granted in discourses about facilitating adult learning, and Kolb's experiential learning, and Knowles andragogy have been central to this development. The past years have been marked by new, unexpected, challenging, and awful experiences, such as COVID. The COVID experience is of interest to educators because it most likely provides a motivation for learning. These experiences provide an opportunity and maybe even force us to reconstruct experience. Access, learner identity and if we are to believe a pre-COVID McKinsey Report, jobs and careers have been in a period of some stability and even predictability (Lund, 2019). Now even the expectations and assumptions we make about the development of, for example, the hospitality industry that is an industry of social closeness is threatened by the requirement for social distancing and the stay-at-home route to education access. COVID-19 is of course a medical disease. We may gather more insights for our purposes if we understand it as also a social disease. I am not going to assume that work and the work of the learner in adult education or higher education are identical, it is useful here to identify that both work and learning share the activity we call work. Lifelong learning ensures they remain connected (Fleming, 2021a).

Work and Learning

And how have identities and work been redefined? We do not know. We can only in this moment of transition out of COVID-19 think that in ways we cannot yet understand, work and learning are being transformed. The race to base working lives, and learning lives, and identities on the internet, Zooming, and Skyping, and Facetiming, and Microsoft Teams may be important. I suspect that the inequalities in the labour market, the marginalization of women, the segmented work on the basis of class, North/South divides will in a moment be amplified and transformed as COVID-19 bites, and maybe bites again. But

widening inequality will remain. Access and learning lives may be affected in similar ways.

How did we experience digital working, and learning, and teaching? What aspect of the crisis emerged in pedagogical work? What benefits emerged? Who won and who lost in the digital world? What questions emerge and what learning will help us face the next crisis? What is the next crisis? Climate? Gender? Race? Migrations? All of these? What broad social and political questions emerged in the crisis? Where are the digital divides and divisions now? How have democracy and social justice fared? What threats are posed by the rise of authoritarianism? So many questions. So many questions for the adult educator with an eye on a transformative pedagogy of crises.

It is becoming clear that the existential, and related crises of climate change, and climate justice may well be addressed by the powerful in society in the same way that COVID was addressed. Denials, fake news, suspicions about science, and of course the much-discredited herd immunity will be recycled in the new crises. The global rise of the Right also poses a threat for democracy, and for the neoliberal economy that is far from being held to democratic accountability. In pursuit of useful ideas for this task of finding a transformative pedagogy of crises and experience, this chapter will turn to and harness the ideas of Oskar Negt and his key understanding of experience as dialectical.

Oskar Negt

Oskar Negt (b. 1934), as an associate of the Frankfurt School, focusses his attention on the ability of education to understand better the social situations in which we find ourselves. By understanding the experiences of learners, the unfair, and unjust social, and economic environment (neoliberalism) can be better understood and hopefully transformed. Negt studied with Horkheimer and Adorno, was assistant to Habermas from 1962, and is an orthodox Marxist and active supporter of social democracy. He continues as a prominent scholar at what many regard as an extension of the Frankfurt

School, in Leibnitz University Hannover. He is driven by similar concerns that motivate all Frankfurt School scholars who address the question of how Nazi Germany emerged. He works theoretically and pedagogically in support of more just, caring, and 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). Negt is a prolific writer on a wide range of topics including philosophy, sociology, and organization theory, and is active in journalism and the media. He works closely with Alexander Kluge, an award-winning movie and TV producer (see Kluge, 2020). Negt researches work as a source of identity and dignity (and injustice); studies pedagogy for adults and schools (as a source for his social theory, emancipatory learning and action); and is active in politics. These ideas are gaining some modest traction in adult education literature (Finnegan, 2022; Fleming, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

His focus is on the experience of workers (learners) that he states is infused with the contradictions of capitalist society and their experience is a source of 'resistance to capitalism' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 31). More importantly these experiences are the starting point for learning and creating social theory. He uses these experiences in his pedagogy, and with sociological imagination he works to understand these issues and prompt 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 pedagogy of experience. Before unearthing further relevant aspects of his pedagogy it is useful to divert momentarily into the roots of these ideas in John Dewey. The transformative pedagogy of Mezirow is also built on these same foundational concepts.

Dewey and Experience

The phases of the process of transformation that start with a disorienting dilemma deal with experiences of disorientation, of fear, of anxiety, and of identifying one's problem with broader social issues. Negt goes beyond Dewey's rather limited view of experience. For Dewey experience has two dimensions. First, experience is in continuity with previous experience. In making meaning new experiences are modified or integrated with previous experience. Mezirow (1978) builds on this, asserting that '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' (p. 101). Second, experience interacts with one's broader environment. Experience is created by this interaction (Dewey, 1963, p. 43). For Mezirow frames of reference interpret experience and dysfunctional frames of reference 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 is the process of becoming aware of these interactions and continuities.

Negt: The Dialectical Understanding of Experience and Its Social Context

Negt, relying on Hegel, asserts that these continuities and interactions of Dewey (and Mezirow) are dialectical. Learning is not just an adaptation or integration of experience; the process is dialectical. One's individual experience cannot be properly understood unless it is seen as being in a dialectical relationship with one's social environment. Disorienting dilemmas and the search for solutions are more complex than understood by Mezirow (1991), and this changes how learning is understood. Without the dialectical,

the relationship between individual experience and the social context each is misconstrued—and so too is learning. The experience of crises is dialectically connected to previous experience. If one cannot speak properly of individual experience unless it is connected to broader social issues, it is clear that crises are neither totally individual nor social. They are both. In so much of the literature on transformative learning, from Mezirow to Hoggan et al. (2017) the dialectical nature of experience is absent. This is a form of 'stuckness' in transformation theory that goes beyond that, to which others such as Hoggan et al. (2017, pp. 50–54) refer. This dialectical understanding avoids falsely dichotomizing social and personal aspects of transformative learning. To work for the dialectical nature of experience is exactly what Maxine Greene proposed when she wrote about learning how things are connected: 'the self can never be actualized through solely private experiences, no matter how extraordinary these experiences might be' (Greene, 1986, p. 74). This is also aligned with Freire's work on transcending traditional western dualisms such as thought/action and teaching/learning.

In light of Negt's work, the political and personal are connected and connected dialectically. If Honneth (1995) asserted that the political is personal, then Negt adds that these connections are dialectical. The critiques that assert that transformation theory does not have a social dimension actually misconstrue the situation. The problem is entirely different. 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 aspect 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. The current crises of the world are not just objectively a product of social agencies, neither do they just happen. 'The ways people interpret crises... gives shape to what these crises come to be, and in return, dialectically these crises affect the fate of those involved' (Fassin & Honneth, 2022, p.3).

Habermas (2008) also expresses this in his own rather complicated way when he writes that the 'public domain of the jointly inhabited interior of our lifeworld is at once inside and outside' (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). The personal and the lifeworld are dialectically interconnected. It is difficult to imagine a stronger statement than this of the false dichotomy of individual and social, and this idea now informs this pedagogy of crisis. Learning requires an ability to perceive the world in this connected way. Transformation theory does not acknowledge this critical insight (Fleming, 2021b). It is this insight borrowed from Hegel and worked through by Habermas, Honneth and Negt that moves this transformative pedagogy forward.

Its emphasis on the dialectic understanding is in line with the recent scholarly work of Peter Alheit (2021). More straight forward examples of dialectics in action than the Goffman inspired example outlined by Alheit show dialectics in operation in the world of ordinary experience. Imagine a game or sport in which points are allocated for a win and a draw. Maybe 1 point for a draw and 2 points for a win. On occasion a team may, in that situation, play safe and settle for a draw. This may lead to a significant number of teams achieving their purpose well before the end of the game—risk averse teams in particular. This can be unsatisfactory for spectators. The administrators of the game (the owners) may want to overcome this team behaviour or strategy. If they allocate instead 3 points for a win this may motivate teams and players and heighten the excitement and experience for spectators. This is an example of the dialectic at play between players, team managers, owners of the game (administrators) and supporters. An action by one will trigger a reaction from other(s) and that reaction in turn may trigger another reaction—and so on. We understand this dialectic in ordinary life.

Kluge, a close collaborator of Negt, is well aware that the implications of this for the practices of bringing about individual or social change are not easy, as the title of his recent book *Drilling through hard boards* (2017) illustrates.

In a world where fake news, conspiracy theories and rejection of scientific knowledge often dominate and undermine public discourse, this pedagogy of transformation may be an exciting possibility but faces significant resistance. In a final acknowledgment of the density of the resistance to such an understanding of learning the final step in the phases of transformation involves taking action on the basis of new transformed perspectives. These actions are not only individual and personal, but essentially social too.

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) or again 'the socialized individual cannot experience individually' (p. 68). The individual is always multiple (Kluge & Negt, 2014). These connections are made to extend the links between the central role of experience in this transformative pedagogy of crises and experience.

Oskar Negt: Adult Educator

A transformative pedagogy informed by the approach of Oskar Negt involves thinking independently, dialectically, systemically, with sociological imagination, utilising critical reflection and democratic participation. Negt (1973) describes adult learning as an analysis that brings into awareness the historical process of how learners' interests are defined for them and how relationships of power are experienced, in order that they can learn about their roles in society. Then they may identify possibilities, and actions, that will change unjust realities. A transformative pedagogy is then involved in social and political arenas and provides a framework for an historical and material interpretation of subjectivity as produced by the neo-liberal system. In addition, it helps learners create a new just and caring social order (Kluge & Negt, 2014).

One more new idea is possible. Workers and learners have a great deal in common and not just as a result of the lifelong learning agenda (Fleming, 2021a). When Negt and Kluge (1993) assert that experience is the most important thing that workers actually produce (p. xlviii) it is within the bounds of reason to suggest that learners also produce experience. When

we then understand how experience is influenced by social structures, there is the possibility of what Maxine Greene (1995) calls breaking-through the inertia of convention when people 'are enabled to explain their "shocks" and reach beyond' (p. 39). Such a (transformative) pedagogy, Greene continues, 'offers life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light' (p. 133). These moments can help transcend limits and engage one's sociological imagination in the process of social transformation (Negt & Kluge, 1993).

Negt's (1975) pedagogy goes beyond the teaching of skills and competencies and emphasizes the importance of understanding 'workers existence as a social problem' (p. 4). It involves workers, or learners, analysing their social situation, interpreting it in order to understand the causes of their current situation and thus inform actions to change it. It focusses on developing a transformative pedagogy of 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).

The implications are clearly applicable to other forms of adult learning. 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 in order to re-imagine the lived experiences of learners and the possibilities that may emerge. This is linked with Mezirow's approach to transformation theory, but with an added, integrated social dimension. The social dimension of a transformative pedagogy is not an optional add-on but an essential part of understanding experience and learning. Thus, transformative pedagogy 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 'six competences', as Negt (2010, pp. 218–234) calls them, are: 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 (Honneth, 1995). The learning involved is meta-learning (Negt, 1993) and along with dialectical thinking are of 'fundamental importance' for transformative pedagogy (p. 661).

Negt's education goes beyond views of education that emphasise personal growth and development that may lead to fitting into the social and democratic structures of the current world. When experience is understood as 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, 1993).

Negt (and Kluge) systematically present materials and suggestions as to how their ideas might be utilised in learning situations (Kluge & Negt, 2014; Negt & Kluge, 1993). This is in marked contrast to the absence of teaching methods in the published transformative learning work of Mezirow. Negt and Kluge use science fiction and a range of innovative materials to support and enhance the critical intelligence of learners (Negt & Kluge, 1993). Negt's contribution to understanding adult learning also includes the concepts of exemplary learning and societal competencies. When a transformative pedagogy of learning is discussed in times of crisis, whether thinking of struggling with a global pandemic, racism, or climate change, we benefit from extending transformative pedagogy by adding this further dialectical process. Using science fiction, satire, fragments of literature, film, and documentaries Negt encourages dangerous thoughts of critical intelligence. Kluge and Negt (2014) collect a visual archive of pedagogical methods for facilitating the exploration of how things could be different (p. 260).

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