**[Mezirow’s Transformative Learning and Freire’s Pedagogy](https://www.intertla.org/event/the-association-of-transformative-learning-theory-with-the-perspective-of-freire/):**

**Theories in Dialogue – Prepared Notes**

Ted Fleming

Teachers College Columbia University

**Key Concepts of Transformative Learning from a Freirean Perspective**

*Theory is auto/biographical*

Both Paulo Freire and Jack Mezirow acknowledge the key roles their wives played in creating their theoretical work. For Paulo it was originally Elsa and now Ana Maria Araújo; for Jack it was Edee whose reading at Sarah Lawrence College as an adult student was central (e.g. Fingarette, 1963, *The Self in transformation*).

The bigger point I am making is that all theory may be auto/biographical. I am happy to argue that all research may be auto/biographical too and I am happy to explore the extent to which teaching is also (and why not) auto-biographical.

Not only is this kind of personal information an antidote to the idea that we do our work alone but it locates our knowledge and learning in a community. Dewey had this idea in 1922 in his discussions with Lippmann when they discussed the kind of knowledge one may need in order to engage in public discussion. Dewey though it wise not to locate this required knowledge in the individual as Lippmann (1922) did but in a broader community (Dewey, 1922).

Each author – Freire and Mezirow - provides a difficult read, material partially explained, iterative understandings of their own work and above all various conference and journal articles written in order to address queries and disagreements, e.g. with Newman and with Inglis.

I am struck by the age at which Mezirow first published TL. He was 55 and the expectation that a fully grown theory of TL might emerge in his lifetime may be abridge too far. A sense in both authors of thngs left unfinished. This may lead to a sense that theories just stopped. But they await a new generation of scholars, researchers and teachers to develop each into living theories.

*Both Freire and Mezirow offer Emancipation*

Each has a different view as to what that means. Freire is a more social and political freedom and Mezirow and more internal, subjective and personal freedom. One offers social freedom and freedom from false ideologies,, unequal distributions of power and social inequalities. The other clearly offers freedom from distorted assumptions and unquestioned assumptions. However, there are also closely related versions of the personal (consciousness change) in Freire and social aspects in Mezirow’s phases of transformation.

*Both Freire and Mezirow studied how we think*

Both Freire and Mezirow’s theories and practices are interested in what we think and how we think.

Though Freire is interested in the consciousness/awareness/ideology aspect and Mezirow is interested in the reflection involved in examining the unquestioned assumptions behind our thinking, feeling, action etc. The shared task continues to be to move peoples’ awareness from  
submerged and uncritical frames of reference to take critical actions that will make the world  
more fair and caring.

*The process of change in Freire and Mezirow involve having particular kinds of conversations*

This interest in how we think leads to having particular kinds of conversations. Of course this is really important for this moment in history when we seem to have great difficulty holding any kinds of conversation especially with people with whom we disagree. And the subject does not seem to matter….it could be climate change, BLM/critical race theory, the school books one might allow in schools or universities, and so on.

*The beginning of learning- problematizing and disorienting dilemmas*

Each shows an interest in where their kind of learning begins. For Freire it is a moment of problematizing and for Mezirow this is a disorienting dilemma. Of course these influence the pedagogy and one may believe that these are at least similar and even very alike. The starting points of all great philosophers of education…wonder is the beginning of wisdom (familiar to Greek scholars) or perplexity for American pragmatists of the Dewey variety. I do not see any great divergence between Freire and Mezirow on this.

*Love is everywhere in Freire? Mezirow – not so much*

Freire is really a powerful advocate for the importance of love (love ones students) as an underpinning for critical consciousness and for dialogue. This clarity escaped Mezirow in his enthusiasm for critical reflection and this has led to some really powerful critiques of TL to the extent that it is overly rational and focused on the mind (rather than heart, body, soul, feelings etc. etc.).

TL hides the level of care and intersubjectivity that necessarily underpins the critical reflection of TL. Habermas is acutely aware of this underpinning of rationality and discourse.

Discourse and transformative learning require intersubjectivity. Habermas (1992) states that the rational potential in linguistic practice is based on sound intersubjectivity that is a “glimmer of symmetrical relations marked by free, reciprocal recognition” (p. 145). Communicative action, discourse and critical reflection are firmly grounded in the mutuality of intersubjectivity.

(Fleming, 2022, p. 30)

And this is also more recently found in Honneth.

*Divergences between Freire and Mezirow: Mostly about being Left or Right*

Both the TL theory and Freire diverge in many ways too and some of this can be explained by the extent to which Freire did not rely on Habermas and Mezirow did not rely on the radical critical theory in a fuller way.

To a great degree both rely to an unanticipated extent on European philosophy and indeed on the critically oriented social sciences. Freire’s references in *Pedagogy* alone include Rosa Luxemburg, Hegel, Marx, Fromm, Marcuse, Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, Husserl, Malraux, Althusser, etc. Mezirow mostly Habermas and others in the symbolic interactionist (Blumer), Phenomenology (Schutz) and social construct (G. Kelly).

We could identify a certain reluctance by Freire to rely on Habermas and a reluctance on the side of TL to identify with the remainder of the critical tradition in Europe that goes well beyond the Frankfurt School. In comparison Freire is on the Left. Mezirow resists any element of naming his position in terms of Left or Right. [Anecdotally he and I often commented on his ambition to turn me back from any Left position and – giving a hint as to his – he would have welcomed me into the humanism fold. Having discussed all the candidates in the upcoming election in the US one day Edee proposed that Jack and I would contribute to the Hilary Clinton street collection in NYC. It was as far Left as he would go and as far Right as I would go].

Freire was on the socialist Left….TL has maintained in its current directions not so Left really.

*Misunderstandings*

Both TL and Freire’s work are equally misunderstood, distorted or misconstrued often by selective reliance on one part or other of the quoted author.

Freire is too often reduced to a methodology for teaching – which it is not but people can understandably see strong suggestions for teaching in Freire work. Many of the important concepts in Freire are interpreted in overly simplistic ways. For example, praxis, dialogue, critical consciousness, etc. In TL, in contrast it has no methodology at all (breaching?) except an occasional hint as to how to dig out one’s ‘assumptive cluster’.

*Theology: A strong Freire interest, Mezirow not at all*

TL has no theological reference point apart from the works on ‘soul’ that might just as clearly disconnect from a religious interpretation of soul. Freire attracts people by his theological understanding and connections. But too many ignore the full package of how Freire is really a re-construction of Biblical ideas in the service of a Christianity that is radically socialist – opts for the poor, is about social transformation, is prophetic in the sense found in the Bible and is a taking of sides…His God has opted for the Oppressed. It is a **Theology of the Oppressed**. As early as 1974 Freire was writing in the Theology journal *Crosscurrents (*Freire, 1974). He was mentioned in Gutierrez famous book on *Liberation Theology*, (Gutierrez, 1971).

My first assignment for Jack Mezirow with whom I was studying in 1978 was Freire’s *Pedagogy*. My first reaction was to follow what for me was the obvious theological threads through concepts such as announcing/denouncing, the Christian virtues of hope and love, the power of the spoken word as a naming and creative force was central to the biblical genesis as well as the First paragraph of the Christian gospel of John. Jack convinced me to progress rather through Freire’s reliance on Dewey, Marx, Engles, Hegel, Rosa Luxemburg, Che Guevara, Mao, Fromm, Marcuse, Lenin, Lukács. In this way a serious blind spot was visible in Mezirow’s thinking concerning the theological thread through Freire’s life and writings. This is also taken up by many followers of Freire in a sort of distorted simplistic approach to education – see later.

My original copy of *Pedagogy* was published by the religious publishers Seabury and bought in the well-stocked book store on 815 2nd Avenue in New York.

*We live in remarkable times as the two most important theories of adult education and learning have been and are being developed in our times*

We as adult educators are fortunate to be working in an era in which these ideas from the Freire tradition and the TL tradition are in the process of being created and now developed further. These are both indigenous theories of learning and education – they are

By adult educators

For adult education

For adult educators

**The role of critical reflection:**

Anti-Moslem, anti-Semitic, anti-women and a rise in hate speech and hate activities along with probably an increase in the inability to be empathetic, the difficulty today to tell what is true from what is false knowledge. Facts seem to be divisive and partisan, even scientific knowledge that is always provisional is now subject to a radical suspicion and subject to the so called culture wars. There seems to be an inability to have respectful conversations between those who disagree and the frequent violent attempts to eliminate or silence different views and differences. Dialogue and critical reflection are having a hard time. Social cohesion is problematic and is undermined by micro-violations and major outbursts. Climate change, Covid, food shortages, refugees, war, and any number of other events seem to throw us off our course. This makes the need for critical reflection more important and the underpinning of this in the respectful engagements with others has to be learned and not taken for granted.

There is a need for social justice in our relationships, in families and communities and in society and this points to so much learning and so much critical thinking that needs to be the focus of an education system that has become, to a great extent, colonized by the imperatives of the economy, and jobs and skills and …

And now along with a number of other countries we are in dire circumstances and what we need more than ever is an analysis of where we are now and an ability to teach people so see clearly how society really is and how it operates in the interests of the few and keeps lower social groups paying for the folly and corruption of the multinational institutions whether it is the banking system, land developers or multinational tax evaders. In Daring to Dream Ana Maria Freire says that the neoliberal economy

Speaks about the need for unemployment, for poverty, for inequality. I feel it is our duty to fight against such fatalistic mechanical forms of comprehending history…if we allow ourselves to fall for the trickery of neoliberal economic discourses, which affirm realities of homelessness and poverty as inevitable, then opposition for change becomes invisible, and our role in fostering change becomes absent. (Freire, 2007, p. 4)

**Misunderstandings and Contradictions**

*Reductionist versions of each*

These are from an interview with Paulo Freire and published in *The Irish times* in 1981:

Lots of different groups of people, sometimes Christian and very naively Christian, worked and developed some kind of action which they called ‘conscientisation’ as if the process of conscientisation could become a kind of aspirin for the so-called poor people….

We sometimes perceive the discovery of a praxis with the name conscientisation though with a total character of manipulation on the part of those doing the action.

I could not prevent institutions and groups from pronouncing my name, from saying they were working according to the ideas of Paulo Freire, but I would have to do something to defend the process, the concepts and ideas I trying to develop.

I will not say that everybody who uses me really agrees with me – no it’s not necessary. Nor will I say that everybody who speaks very well about me is really understanding me. No, that wouldn’t be normal. (Kirby 1981)

The Irish audience did not fully grasp either the radical Marxist liberation theory of Freire or the radical political and social transformation he was promoting. On the one hand so many easily grasped ideas about banking, dialogue, teachers learning and learners teaching, literacy for all. These phrases captured the imagination of many educators and gave expression to a deep desire to humanize education and make its policies and practices well grounded. Teaching methods are too easily adopted and treated as a tool kit or a bag of tricks and how to do it. On the other hand Freire has left a philosophically dense and insightful body of work that was always focused on the social and political transformation of society through learning and education.

Reduced versions of each set of theories. E.g declarations that one is following a Freireian method or a TL approach….

Concepts not so clearly understood, e.g. praxis, critical reflection. Disorienting dilemma, transformation as a concept itself is easily misunderstood, misapplied or used in the common sense way it is legitimately used in the English language today. This applies to any language…in translation so much is added, and so much is lost in translation. How can praxis be understood except by a considerable amount of hard work beginning maybe with Hegel and in a field of practitioners, this is not going to happen very often.

Teacher and student teach and learn is not always seen as the dialectical process it is and how it ushers in a new epistemology that re-constructs how knowledge (learning) is created in a dialectical dialogue. New knowledge is best created it seems in a teacher-student discourse.

*Theories incomplete and in process: Both living theories*

Each theory is a theory in process and in progress. 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000, 2010 and now 2020s

*Broader issues in each: Policy work and involvements with Schools and Education Systems*

Freire was highly political and involved in schools - Minister for Education.

TL is always interested in justice and Mezirow’s work in the broader field of education in Pakistan and in Thailand cried out for further elaborations and for asking how theory work and research and teaching and policy debates and interventions are personal in the sense that they are developmental too and maybe transformative.

*How does each author understand how the social and personal are connected*

I believe that TL misconstrues more often than not how the personal and social are connected – how the individual and the social/political are connected. This link has been lost, I believe because TL has been instrumental in how it relates to critical theory – borrow from Habermas is ok but does not look at the entire orientation of the Frankfurt School. This is partly because the FS was not as accessible to an English speaking world as it is today and because America is not really, as an education system in general, open to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. One could say many elements of the higher education system may be remarkably liberal but at the same time illiberal in its approach to left leaning critical theory.

Freire as a Brazil citizen in the Global South was in sharp contrast to those who articulate TL in the North and this more often means that colonial analysis is more to the fore in Freire than in TL literature. Mezirow and TL do not have a deep and constant anti-colonial analysis in its literature – but this is changing as in conference papers. However, as everything is contextual, TL has a credible record of facing racist frames of reference and practices (Brookfield).

TL does not have a well worked out concept of emancipation…maybe Freire is ahead on this.

Neither Freire nor Mezirow’s work have become drivers or informers of public policy in European countries that all have instead jumped on the Lifelong Learning bandwagon that is to some extent empty of critical ideas and instead full of economic dimension speak and social equality….this is a problematic situation as the best ideas that inform our field are ignored by policy positions – in general. However, there are some exceptions and particular subsections of the field of adult education such as literacy have been more successful at this inclusion of TL and Freire in its work.

Irish education policy is plagued by this divide too. Each opportunity to grasp a set of worthwhile ideas and implement them in a white paper of policy position the most easily grasped and methodologically convenient aspect was implemened. The Irish system could have grasped a more accessible approach and less radical approach of John Dewey or it could have really adopted the Freire approach. On successive occasions (Investment in Education) the system went for the catch phrase but ignored the depth. So the task of educators is to rise above the already accepted practice of ‘following a Freirean method’ and instead trawl the depth to rediscover the potential that resides in education to create a society not just for workers but for citizens, a society not just of the governed but of active participating citizens in the decision making process.

**Suggestions for educational research and practice**

1. One is to stop doing something that is probably contradictory: The search for a method, a technique, a measure or most accurately a test for assessing whether TL has occurred. This may be a further channeling of TL into an epistemological *cul-de-sac* where an instrument is sought to measure something that is not amenable to being measured in an instrumental fashion.
2. So much research in TL is in the category of a ‘self-reported transformation’. If I said I had a transformative experience…then I did!!! It is not easy to have a TL experience. Explain.
3. ESREA, ITLAssoc, Bi-annual conferences and recent developments and *Journal of Transformative Education* are all indications that this field is developing continuously.

For example Nicolaides, S. Eschenbacher, P.T. Buergelt, Y. Gilpin-Jackson, M. Welch, Misawa, (Eds.), The Palgrave Handbook of Learning for Transformation (pp. 25-43). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84694-7_2>

4 there is a need to work on developing teaching materials from such as Ira Shorr, Hope & Timmel (2003a, 2003b) have done in the Freire tradition.

Again and again we need to do what Freire did so well: latch on the best thinking that is  
available now….Pikitty, Giroux, Chomsky, Habermas, Nussbaum, Nancy Fraser, Stiglitz as we  
borrow heavily from other disciplines, like Freire did and make these current analyses serve our  
present understanding. Mezirow was a relentless gatherer of ideas and concepts from other authors who supported his theory – Belenky, Kegan, etc. This work needs to continue too. New insights from neuroscience seem promising.

From where is the next iteration of TL going to emerge? A critical mass of practitioners, teachers, researchers, colleagues, friends will hopefully…….

**Selected references**

Dewey, J. (1922). Public opinion - Review. *The New Republic, 30*, pp. 286-288.

Fingarette, H. (1963). *The self in transformation: Psychoanalysis, philosophy and the life of the spirit*. New York: Harper & Row.

Fleming, T. (2022). Critical theory and transformative learning: Making connections with Habermas, Honneth and Negt.  In A. Nicolaides, S. Eschenbacher, P. Buergelt, Y. Gilpin-Jackson, M. Welch, & M. Misawa (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Learning for Transformation* (pp. 25-43). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Freire, P. (1974). Conscientization. *Cross Currents, (24)*1, 23-31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24457877>

Freire, P. (2007). *Daring to dream: Toward a pedagogy of the unfinished*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm

Gutierrez, G. (1971). A theology of liberation. New York: Orbis Books.

Habermas J. (1992). *Postmetaphysical thinking*. Oxford: Polity.

Hope, A. & Timmel, S. (2003a). *Training for transformation: A handbook for community workers. Book IV*. London: Intermediate Technology Development Group. ISBN: 1 85339 461 0

Hope, A. & Trimmel, S. (2003b). *Training for transformation: A handbook for community workers.* Vols. 1-4. London: ITDG. US: Practical Action.

Kirby, P. (1981). Liberating or domesticating education. *The Irish Times* July 21, 1981, p. 10. <https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/529080475/fulltextPDF/A272F468F4384EA1PQ/1?accountid=10226>

Lippmann, W. (1922) *Public Opinion*. New York: Transaction Publishers.

Souto-Manning (2010). *Freire, teaching and learning: Culture circles across contexts* (pp. 61-65). New York: Peter Lang.