

**Indignation and the Struggle for Recognition:  
Learning Cities, Transformative Learning and Emancipation<sup>1</sup>**

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**In Praise of Cities**

In Bruno Bettelheim's auto-biography *Recollections and Reflections* (1992) he writes a short chapter on 'The child's perception of the city' where wonderful buildings and museums await discovery;

This then I believe to be the museum's greatest value to the child...: to stimulate...to captivate – his imagination; to arouse his curiosity so that he wishes to penetrate more deeply the meaning of what he is exposed to in the museum; to give him a chance to admire in his own time, things that are beyond his ken; and most important of all, to give him a feeling of awe for the wonders of the world. It is hardly worth the effort to try to grow up into – and fully live within – a world that is not full of wonder.

(Bettelheim, 1992, p. 148)

In more modern times James Joyce *Ulysses* (1968) tells the story of a day in the life of the city of Dublin and in olden times Jerusalem the central Jewish city in the Old Testament offers images, stories, metaphors for engaging with something wonderful, even God and ultimate things. Augustine later used The City of God as an image of ultimate desire (2003). Henri Lefebvre writes of cities as liminal spaces, spaces of transition, possibility and transformation. Cities are often seen as open spaces of debate with the possibility of being different, more human, including alternative lifestyles and identities.

Cities are deceptive in that they offer freedom, freedom of choice, provided you have the money to spend on its undoubted attractions of shopping malls, pedestrian zones, entertainments, art, and Starbucks! Seduction by cappuccino! Boutique shops, pop-ups, boutique hotels, boutique pets and boutique lifestyles! Cities are socially stratified, layered in ways that reflects one's wealth. Increased segmentation and barriers to mingling are masked by the apparent openness of the public spaces (Harvey, 2013, p. xv). There is an increased problem with who belongs to this created and manufactured space. Regeneration goes with displacement, squatters assert ancient rights; property owners create new rights; different kinds of power are exercised by the citizens of different localities; surplus wealth is disguised in

<sup>1</sup> These lecture notes and prompts were the basis for the keynote address at the Larissa City Council/Hellenic Adult education Association Conference Adult Education and the Learning Society, Larissa, Greece June 2015. Also on [www.tedfleming.net](http://www.tedfleming.net)

property portfolios. It raises this question: What kind of reconfiguration of the city would enhance the lives of all citizens – for anyone attempting to bring real adult learning to bear on community and social problems (Lefebvre, 1968).

The role of cities and their public spaces in bringing about change is impressive. These spaces provide locations in which the less powerful relate to the most powerful in impressive and successful ways. Syntagma (here in Greece, Tahrir (Cairo, Tiananmen Sq. in China, Catalunya (Barcelona) and wall Street (new York are well known venues where deep currents of political indignation and unrest met, confronted and interrogated powerful elites who in turn utilize powerful actions (often with the state) to subdue insurrection and protest. The city is sometimes a zone of conflict.

### **Austerity and the City**

Austerity describes the economic and political climate in which we live. We are required to 'do more with less' and manage with scarce resources as a result of deep cuts in public expenditure (often called adjustments). Austerity is first and foremost a transfer of wealth from the lower and middle classes to the classes above them. This is a capitalist class project and is part of the system we call neo-liberalism (Watson, 2015). The rules of the neoliberal game are about making sure that if conflicts arise between collective well-being and saving feral banks, the banks are saved. But these problems could have been resolved differently by first saving those who were lower down the social ladder by providing homes, health care and education and then go on to address financial problems. That did not happen. This is what happened: loads of money was given to Greece, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Italy and it was sent straight back to the German and French banks. The German banks were saved by their government and the cost was paid by poorer nations and peoples. These ideas are worked out in greater detail in the work of Harvey (2005, 2008, 2015), Piketty (2014), Sen (2015), Giroux (2015) and Watson (2015). According to Harvey neoliberalism is

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.

(Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

Neoliberalism does not aim to increase the well-being of everybody but increases social inequality and this in turn drives a more competitive society and economy. In this environment education is tasked with producing resources for the workplace and through a leaner system of education it is required to meet the needs of the economy for skilled workers. It also attempts to re-focus the educational curriculum to be more business friendly and produce graduates who are more 'work-ready'.

It is an accurate synopsis of the economic theory of Keynes to say that austerity reduces money flow in peoples' pockets, depresses demand for goods and increases unemployment further

(Keynes, 1936). The Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (2015) in an article in the left of centre magazine *New Statesman* (2015), states that as early as 1919 in his 'The Economic Consequences of the Peace' Keynes pointed to the damage austerity would do to Germany through the punitive provisions of the Treaty of Versailles.

In a recent article in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Jürgen Habermas writes against the further humiliation of Greece by the creditors in Germany (2015) and argues against a 'grotesque exchange' with a derogatory superior in pursuit of austerity! Germany had, he continues, disowned the consequences of the demands it is making on Greece – an explosion of social misery and he finds this to be morally embarrassing. In earlier Greek history Solon (640-558), according to Plutarch, made far reaching changes the most important of which stipulated that in the event of civil unrest in the city, every man had to side with a faction otherwise he would lose his civil rights. This was to prevent anyone waiting to see how the event unfolded. In addition he introduced measures to abolish debt (shaking off burdens) and set free those made slaves by the burden of debt. These changes and many other created the environment for the future prosperity and glory of Athens.

As cities increasingly become economic entities in their own right (partly because the nation state is in decline as such around the world), the city is 'constructed as an entrepreneurial rather than a social democracy' (Harvey 2005, p, 47). Cities have then been convinced that they ought to value, train and support learning for working in this new economy. This is the overall notion of the learning city. The learning city comes from the same background as lifelong learning (CERI, 1992).

### **The Learning City**

Two OECD Conference on Educating Cities in Barcelona (1989) and again in Gothenburg (1992) led to the OECD Report *City Strategies for Lifelong Learning* (CERI, 1992).<sup>2</sup> It found that success resulted when cities integrated the work of local governments, private enterprises and educational institutions to meet the human resource needs of the local economy.

A vision for a Learning City might include: Democratic controls over all the resources! Local government to redistribute wealth to favor not capital or private developers but to favor inclusion, equality, fairness and an increased capacity to care for people, communities and the learning needs of all. There must be a reclaiming of the city, its space, its planning and its ability to make itself (again) in the interests of all. Establish a Right to the City (Harvey 2008, p. 53; 2013, p. xii).

Many cities have declared themselves to be Learning Cities and formed associations such as the Learning Cities Network or The Right to the City Alliance that support a notion of lifelong

<sup>2</sup> These notes are based on and reconfigure the insights of David Harvey on both neoliberalism and the learning city. He is currently at the Department of Geography & Anthropology, New York University. See <http://davidharvey.org/>

learning that enables people compete in the global economy. The notion of the Learning City enables urban governments to promote the learning of their citizens and also to connect citizens to the educational services that best meets the labor needs of the city. Without requiring them to provide any additional educational service, the learning city, then, allows urban governments to play an active role in the learning of their citizens. In the OECD model, however, this learning is almost exclusively directed towards improving the economic productivity of individuals.

Learning cities are hugely interesting and important. It is important to foster through education the continuing economic development of individuals, cities and economies. The problem is in the exclusively economic base of this idea as it is so often proposed. It is most often proposed in public policies as the exclusive promotion of right wing versions of economic activity, the triumph of the unregulated economy that wants to have small or low cost government but then needs government to support its version of learning and indeed to bail it out when things go wrong.

I am both skeptical and deeply suspicious of forms of education that reduce learning to the instrumental, that reduce cities to economic entities and learners to consumers and/or workers. I am not a believer in the idea that 'a rising tide lifts all boats' in the economy. In fact relative poverty has increased each time the economy has progressed (boomed). Poverty is not the same in rural and urban areas though they are connected as rural departures increase urban arrivals. Cities have been particularly vulnerable to inequality and poverty, more so now as half the world's population lives in cities.

Neoliberalism is now so wide spread that it is not easy to imagine a way through these challenges. The task of a conference such as this is to do exactly that – do the hard thinking, the difficult imagining so that all can benefit from the inventions of science, the opportunities of living in wonderful cities without the disastrous losses of modern urban decay. The learning city should be tuned to enhancing our understanding of the tremendous costs and downside of economic development and how to grow more sustainable ways of living and reduce exploitation. The main task is to imagine and work toward the creation of a learning city that is for all its citizens and not just the concentration of more wealth in the hands of few.

### **Larissa is Different**

It is clear that in Larissa things are different. The City Council and the participating educational institutions have together taken on a view of education that is expressed in a language infused with democratic imperatives. All the officials and elected representatives give priority to citizens, encouraging citizens, learning citizens, engaged citizens. This is important as the language captures the values of the city and its learning projects.

This is a task for the local council, the citizens and the educational system. And with this mind I want to propose some ideas that might be informative. And then present a number of insights from adult education (I will focus on the transformative learning of Jack Mezirow) that are tried,

tested, used and effective in informing community development and community work and community education.

### **What do we know that may be of assistance in supporting a properly functioning Learning City?**

The city allows kinds of learning to take place that may not be possible in other contexts and opens the possibility that together the citizens and the institutions may make the place a better environment in which to live, rear children, and work and enjoy living. With this in mind the city needs to be investigated, studied, understood, explored, saved from its worst possibilities...and created in the interests of its dwellers rather than in the pursuit of profit and land exploitation.

Wealthy classes are able and mostly succeed in taking advantage of learning and educational opportunities in ways that is out of proportion to their numbers in society, e.g. fee support, grants, or even free education either at secondary or third level education.

The built environment of a city is planned by authorities, designed, constructed and maintained differently in proportion to social class. Ghettos are built. The built environment influences how people act and behave.

New ways of living in the built environment have to be learned (and previous ones unlearned).

Internet infrastructure is not only for business communications and working class entertainment (sales and soccer) but needs to be a super highway with easy access for all and not just a way of making money. A role for government here.

Learning is too often seen as unquestionably good, assumed to be virtuous, and in the interest of everybody. Some learning is not good? Some learning is not in the interest of the learner. All learning and all knowledge is problematic, partial, temporary, for now, open to be abused, bought, sold, and exploited.

What is adult learning, when it is not a neoliberal construct?

Is there more to learning than the transmission of knowledge, skills and information?

Learning is not an individual pursuit but a social phenomenon.

Social learning should deliver social justice, care, inclusion and prosperity for all citizens.

### **What is Adult learning in the Learning City?**

What then in the context of the learning City do we mean when we speak of learning? We know a great deal about learning already having spent, each one of a great deal of time learning at school at college, from life, at work as members of communities and organizations and from involvements with church and other worthy institutions in society. We also live in an age when

some of the greatest contributors to our understanding of learning have been writing, e.g. Paulo Freire and Jack Mezirow.

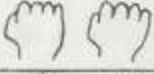
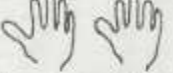
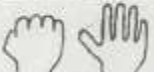
A number of things are worth saying here. Firstly, some distinguished educators will say adult education is different to other forms of education/learning. Others equally distinguished will say they are similar or continuous. Let me say that there are both similarities and differences. And in a moment I will look at what distinguishes adult learning from other forms of learning.

But let me say one thing on which I hope we can all agree. When you look at the most successful civil society organizations whether in the UK, Ireland, Malta or Greece they are to a great extent learning organizations in the most astonishing ways. We may not need for a while any of the great philosophers of education – Dewey, Freire etc. but look first at what an organization had to learn in order to be effective in pressing forward with its work: I take as an example the Hepatitis C scandal in Ireland where the blood transfusion service infected women with Hep C. In the beginning individual women found that they were infected and had long-term consequences. Then they began to hear they were not alone, they began learning about their subject as a medical issue; how to form groups and operate in a civil society and learned how to act in ways that confronted the state who wished they would not pursue their actions for damages. They learned about PR; computers; lobbying; the law; forming collaborative and supportive relationships. They learn as groups in civil society that bureaucracies and/or right wing governments or councils (who emphasize and encourage individuals to engage in autonomy of action) fight with all the considerable resources at their disposal to hide, obfuscate and delay or even deny compensations for wrongs and injuries. These groups frequently have to vindicate their human and legal rights through the European courts. These kinds of groups are well worth studying in some detail, especially as they are seen to be hugely successful, inclusive, insightful, agents of change and powerful levers against vested interests – speaking truth to power. These organizations and others like them are examples of what Habermas may call ‘an appropriate relation between bureaucratic decisions and quasi-parliamentary deliberations by means of a process of public communications’ (1989, p. 234).

### *What is learning?*

But the most important and third question I want to address is: what is adult learning? In this I want to turn to just one key thinker: Jack Mezirow and here I need your help.....

[We then engaged here with an exercise that tried to demonstrate how each individual imposes meaning on a fairly simple situation in a large variety of different ways.] Some interpreted the exercise as an exchange of symbols and gestures of openness (or of being closed). Others took a different stance and began to think this might be about collecting points and maybe winning the most points (or the least number of points or even the same number of points as their partner). In these cases and in all the range of meanings that one can impose on this exercise each and every meaning is a result of two processes (they may be connected).

IF	STUDENT A	STUDENT B
	1	1
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	FIST 4 AND PALM O	

First, the result of one's individual life history with a particular set of parents and a family and an unique life history that produces ways of interpreting reality. Second, the source of such ideas is the socio-cultural environment in which one grows up and lives in. The source of meaning is partly from the society and culture, the Greek way of seeing the world, or male or female ways of making meaning. It could be the result of religious frames of reference. It is also a reality that there are Western and Eastern frames of reference that influence meaning schemes.

Now we can see how many assumptions we always already make in even the most ordinary exchanges. How much more complex are the assumptions we make in more complex, difficult, controversial and contested communications. Becoming aware of

- what these assumptions are
- where they came from – individual stories and/or cultural background
- whether they are adequate for the present
- the search for and testing of new assumptions
- and acting on the basis of these new sets of assumptions (that in turn become open to new critique). New assumptions are better if they are more inclusive, more integrative of our experiences and more open to change than the old ones.

The range of assumptions each one has was imagined (in my simple mechanical model as a filing cabinet (meaning structure or frame of reference) packed full of meanings gathered from one's individual experiences and culture.



The kind of learning Mezirow calls transformative includes the process of becoming aware of the great big descriptors on one's own filing cabinet. For my own meaning scheme at an illustrative level it probably has great collections of meaning best described as Irish, white, European, male, catholic, middle-class, etc. These 'filing cabinets' act as sets of assumptions that are always in construction, always in need of being made more functional, more inclusive and more able to integrate experiences.



*What is critical reflection?*

Of key importance to the theory and practice of transformative learning is the daunting process of critical reflection. How is this done? It is a big ask of teachers and of students. So an exercise to illustrate:





We took the above slide of a notice board found in Starbucks who thanked their customers for helping renovate a local school. Why were Starbucks doing this? Why did the head teacher need to go this route? Who should have been doing this and many other questions suggest themselves either by the teacher or the students. In this process one comes to discuss topics and ideas that one might not originally see of relevance. For instance, why are there so many coffee shops in Larissa? This open questions as to how many people are about in town all day? Levels of employment or unemployment? Why so many young people in coffee shops playing scrabble and/or other pursuits? One comes fairly quickly through a structured set of questions to engage in an archeology of life in Larissa (as Freire discussed).

Now you might begin to see that what adults can do with such material through their ability to think, critique, critically reflect and deal with systemic issues is the defining characteristic of adult education.

*Praxis: What is it?*

In a Learning City, at least some of the learning (and potentially always some to this learning) would be of this critical kind. It would allow participants become more critical of the ways in

which power is exercised..... and creative in the way to address issues that are of concern to them. But one more idea emerged in the discussions. When looking at the number of coffee shops the students very quickly pointed to a similar number of pharmacies and this allowed both teacher and students to ask together interesting questions about illness, health, well-being in Larissa. Questions arise about legitimate drug use and how it relates to health and mental health issues in the area. It allows easy access to discussion about illegitimate drug use as well as anti-biotic use and other concerns about the role of medication in life. What is a healthy life? Is it easy to achieve today? What are the risks? Is obesity an issue? Etc.

In this discussion it was clear that new knowledge was created. This was not created by the teacher alone, or by the students alone. In fact it was only created because in a collaborative investigation in which knowledge was shared and each contribution 'sparked' another. This learning and teaching process is called praxis by Freire (1972, p. 60).

### **Recognition in Honneth as Motivation for Learning**

Another question is worth looking at. Why would anyone engage in this kind of learning? One needs to be up early for this critical reflection!

My best guess is that adults are in a lifelong pursuit of recognition from cradle to grave.<sup>3</sup> The Struggle for Recognition (Honneth 1995) shows how the indignation and the many misrecognitions that adults experience propel them toward a remedy. It is my research findings that adult are propelled toward adult education and higher education as part of their pursuit of recognition. For details of work see Fleming (2014).

As a final connection I am suggesting here that it is a useful connection between Honneth and Mezirow to reinterpret the disorienting dilemma, so essential as a starting point for transformative learning as a in many ways a struggle for recognition.<sup>4</sup>

### **Returning to Larissa: Learning City**

In putting together a Learning City and in acknowledging the continuing role of the EU in this process a number of evidence-based proposals from research undertaken in Ireland on social partnerships might be worth sharing (Murphy & Fleming, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> This argument is worked out in Fleming, T. (forthcoming, 2015). Reclaiming the emancipatory potential of adult education: Honneth's critical theory and adult students in higher education. *Journal of Research in the Learning and Education of Adults* (RELA).

Services delivered by the state or local authorities need to be integrated and not piecemeal;

Government (local & national) need civil society organizations in order to deliver services;

Have a Learning Plan for the Learning City;

Success of service delivery is in proportion to the extent to which the state delivers that integrated service;

BOTH top-down and bottom-up or 'market-led' approaches (each normally assigned to either state or community approaches) could be reconfigured so that they both operate in a democratic partnership with the aim of acting in consensus;

All in the activity must understand that the only way forward is through learning – we can only learn to move forward; Learning drives change;

How could anyone be against Learning Cities, Lifelong Learning, or Learning for All? But the insights of community education is to remain super critical and suspicious of:

Market led; centre led or community led initiatives alone.

Members of the Board that manage a Learning City project will tell you everything – who is included? Who is excluded? How did each one get onto the board?

Be aware of what Learning Cities are for, i.e, to improve outcomes for the community; build community capacities; strengthen the ability of citizens to govern;

Be aware of what Learning Cities are against;

Learning Cities must take sides and emphasise justice, fairness, and care (instead of unbridled profit too often associated with other Learning Cities – not in Larissa.

There are real problems, e.g. drugs and particularly violence in families, in communities, on the street (related to urban poverty) that unless they are addressed this will undermine the project of the Learning City. No point having a Learning City if we do not learn how to address these problems.

Democracy is complex, difficult, challenging, messy, slow but worth it. It involves rally hard work to transform the long traditions of returning to the private world of interpersonal relations and family. Learning City will enhance the environment in which families will continue to be important.

Projects have a life cycle. Always know that a project is more than a pilot scheme. Projects and funding are not permanent but should be funded for long enough to make a real impact.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the issues raised were discussed in a lengthy question and answer session at the conference. One idea I undertook to share was the Maya Angelou poem I know why the caged bird sings.

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still

and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

(Angelou, 1994)

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