Rethinking the Critical Theory influences on Transformative Learning:

In Dialogue with Honneth[1]

Ted Fleming

National University of Ireland Maynooth

Abstract

This paper discusses Honneth's critical theory in order to develop the theory of transformative learning as emancipatory learning. This dialogue includes: rethinking the relationship between personal and social learning; a reinterpretation of disorienting dilemmas as a struggle for recognition; a reconfiguring the relationship between personal problems and social issues.

From the beginning Mezirow relied on Habermas for theoretical support and in particular on his concepts of critical reflection and emancipation (Habermas, 1972). Later he relied on Habermas's (1984) understanding of the kinds of free open dialogues that support democrary and transformative learning (TL). Mezirow borrowed pragmatically, without taking into account the works of other critical theorists such as Adorno, Hoekheimer, Fromm, and Marcuse that are the Frankfurt School. Having conducted research for Mezirow in the 1970s aimed at updating his (and more importantly my) understanding of critical theory I am aware of the how his work was focussed on ideas useful for developing a philosophical foundation for TL. More recently, it is clear from access generously given to Jack's library (I had this access on many occasions and indeed he to mine) that detailed engagement with critical theory may have escaped his attention, but he had studied of Jay (1973), Schroyer (1975) and Geuss (1981). His reliance on Habermas protected his work from critiques that, for example, asserted that TL had an individual rather than a social view of learning (Fleming, 2002).

As the third generation of critical theorists emerges it is an opportune moment to think about the implications that this iteration of critical theory might have for TL. Previous papers (Fleming, 2011, 2014) have addressed the interpretation of TL that sees learning as individual and lacking a social dimension. This paper will review more recent work of Honneth on emancipation that follows directly from the Habermas project and Mezirow's borrowings (1978).

Critical theory as a school of thought engages in a critique of society drawing on a wide range of disciplines with an interest in not merely understanding society but changing it. The changes may be political, social or economic and aim to bring about justice and freedom

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using a neo-Marxist set of analytical tools including ideology critique and occasionally psychoanalytic insights, e.g. Fromm (see Fleming, 2012).

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8) is;

> the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

Who is Axel Honneth?

Axel Honneth's refocussed critical theory continues to hold that the living conditions of;

> Modern capitalist societies produce social practices, attitudes, or personality structures that result in a pathological distortion of our capacities for reason…They always aim at exploring the social causes of a pathology of human rationality.

> (Honneth, 2009, p. vii)

In re-imagining emancipatory philosophy he foregrounds a theory of intersubjectivity and the 'struggle for recognition' as the crucial mooring points for the future of critical theory. The task of his critical theory is to identify experiences in society that contain 'system-exploding energies and motivations' in pursuit of freedom and justice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 242). He offers 'a link between the social causes of widespread feelings of injustice and the normative objectives of emancipatory movements' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p.113). Honneth re-writes critical theory so that damaged recognition is the pathology to be overcome, rather than Habermas's distorted communication. He links together the struggles of individuals to be recognized by significant others with self-realization, that is only achieved through interpersonal relations. In a direct connection with Habermas;

> Individuation is pictured not as self-realization of the independently acting subject carried out in isolation and freedom but in a linguistically mediated process of socialization and the simultaneous constitution of life-history that is conscious of itself…Individuality forms itself in relations of intersubjective acknowledgement and intersubjectively mediated self-understanding.

> (Habermas, 1992, pp. 152-153)

Building on Mead and Winnicott he outlines how only by taking the perspective of others towards oneself can one begin to construct a sense of self, with beliefs, desires, values and needs (Mead, 1934, p. 151). Of course, the perspectives of others are shaped by culture, life history and by internalizing these the individual grows. Later as socialized adults, one can critique inherited values; decide on their justification and adequacy; alter, test and integrate them in the light of this reflection. This is transformative learning.

Honneth (1995, p. 92) argues that the struggle for recognition, based on the need for self-esteem and the experience of disrespect, also explains *social* development.

> It is by the way of the morally motivated struggles of social groups - their collective

attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition - that the normatively directional change of societies proceeds.

Social change is driven by inadequate forms of recognition and internal (psychic) conflict leads to social change. In this way the social and personal are connected.

Distortions in identity provide motivation for struggle and social conflict and this moves the debate about emancipation away from the perceived highly cognitive and rational interest of Habermas toward a theory of intersubjectivity. This has the potential to resolve the problem in transformation theory as to whether learning is an individual or social phenomenon. It implies that not only is the personal political but the political is personal. Transformative learning can only be understood as both personal and social (Fleming, 2002).

As self-development can only be achieved through interpersonal relationships (Honneth, 1995, p.74), one's private relationships of love and attachment are a precondition for participation in political will formation, public life and democracy. Following Bowlby and Mead, Honneth (1995, p. 79) sees taking the perspectives of others as moments of such recognition;

> …for it is his taking of the attitude of the others that guarantees to him the recognition of his own rights. To be a 'me' under these circumstances is an important thing. It gives him his position, gives him the dignity of being a member in the community…It is the basis of his entering into the experience of others.

> (Mead, 1934 in Honneth, 1995, p. 79)

Honneth (1995, p. 107) interprets the separation between mother and child as a struggle for recognition leading to the development of the child's independence that he also understands through Winnicott's object-relations theory. Perspective taking is essential for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, p. 104). Transformative learning and communicative action are always already more than the following of rules of discourse or dialogue (Habermas, 1987, p. 121) and involve mutuality and intersubjectivity (Honneth, 1995, pp. 92-95). The antidote to being too individualistic lies in critical theory as articulated by both Habermas and Honneth.

Honneth argues that there are three differentiated recognition orders in modern society. The first is self-confidence and is established and developed in relationships of friendship and love. If one experiences love an ability to love one's self and others is developed and one is then capable of forging an identity. Without a special relationship with another person and the recognition involved this it is not possible to become aware of one's own uniqueness and special characteristics. This is reminiscent of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Fleming, 2008) that maps the relationships of trust that build a secure base for a child's development. These are the preconditions for the formation of identity and the ability to become involved in a democratic society. Adult relationships can also be infused with such recognitions and are also developmental.

The second type of relationship to self involves self-respect, when a person is given recognition as a morally and legally mature person. When a person is recognized as having rights they have an ability to participate in the dialogues of organizations and society. Legal rights institutionalize the acknowledgements that each owes to another as autonomous

persons. Without rights there is no respect and laws symbolize this (Honneth, 1995, p. 118). This form of recognition acknowledges the ability to be part of social dialogues.

The third form of recognition is provided through work or when a community honors one's contribution through work. This leads to self-esteem. Relationships of solidarity with others in work and communities enhance one's self esteem and one is recognized as having something to contribute to the community and one becomes 'recognized as a person whose capabilities are of constitutive value to a concrete community' (Honneth, 1997, p. 30). People with high self-esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each other's contribution to the community (Honneth, 1995, p. 129). These three forms of recognition constitute Honneth's version of the good life as they provide the conditions for successful identity development.

It is not surprising that there are three corresponding forms of disrespect (Honneth, 1995, p. 131). If people are denied rights their self-respect may suffer, or as Huttunen expresses it, there is 'a mal-distribution of recognition' that damages self-esteem (2007, p. 428). Disrespect harms subjects and is destructive because it 'injures them with regard to the positive understanding of themselves that they have acquired intersubjectively' (Honneth, 1995, p, 131). If a child is neglected and humiliated they may lose self-confidence. If people are denied their rights their self-respect may suffer and if one's way of life is not respected damage is done to one's self-esteem. For these reasons, abuse, insults, ignoring people will not only be an injustice (it will harm people and deny their rights) but injuries are done to their understanding of themselves, their identity (Honneth, 1995, p. 132).

In highlighting misrecognition Honneth brings private matters to the centre of sociological attention and struggles for recognition motivate social action and change. The theory of recognition establishes a link between the social causes of experiences of injustice and the motivation for emancipatory movements (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 113). Internal conflicts lead to social change and we begin to see how in Honneth's critical theory the social and personal are connected. The political is personal! In this process the age old sociological dualism of structure and agency is being reconfigured. As in much of critical theory the best solution is not to fix the priority given to structure or agency but to see how they are connected dialectically.

The Freedom Turn of Honneth
Honneth goes beyond Habermas by seeking a broader vision of democracy involving not only the political sphere but emancipated democratic families and a socialized market (Honneth, 2014, p. 345). The realizations of freedom in one of these areas depends on its realization in others as democratic citizens, emancipated families and ethical markets 'mutually influence each other, because the properties of one cannot be realized without the other two' (Honneth, 2014, p. 331). Free market participants, self-aware democratic citizens and emancipated family members 'mutually influence each other, because the properties of one cannot be realized without those of the other two' (Honneth, 2014, p. 330-1). A working democracy requires all sectors (family, labor and democratic public sphere) to work in collaboration.

From the first sentence of his most recent work, *Freedom's Right* Honneth (2014, p. 15) states that freedom is the key value of modern life;

> Of all the ethical values prevailing and competing for dominance in modern society, only one has been capable of leaving a truly lasting impression on our institutional order: freedom, i.e. the autonomy of the individual….all modern ethical ideals have been placed under the spell of freedom….

Freedom involves inhabiting a space where social life can be better. It involves the ability to realize one's own desires, intentions and values in the social environment of roles and obligations. As one might anticipate, individual and social freedom are connected – and not in some vague or superficial way but essentially. In addition, he asserts that markets, interpersonal relationships and the spaces of public politics are best understood as places of potential social freedom. Places such as work, friendships, family, are all justified only if they promote, support and bring about a free society for all. These can be evaluated as successful to the extent that they encourage and bring into being social freedom and a better life. Education and the right to education are part of that emancipatory project.

In *Freedom's Right* Honneth (2014) sets out to update Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1979) for the present era. More importantly for this study, he reorients critical theory again to focus on freedom rather than on recognition (Honneth, 2014, p. 337). In order to realise social freedom three conditions must be realised. Individuals must be able to view each other's freedom as a condition for their own (2014, p. 60). Secondly, there is a validity and persuasive power in institutions that enhance and enable mutual recognition and the members of a free society are defined as free by their ability to enhance and initiate mutual recognition (2014, p. 261). Thirdly, social freedom involves the expectations and obligations of relational institutions that must be agreed on by all members in reflexive dialogue (2014, p. 59). This has implications for transformative learning that valorizes emancipatory learning.

Family, friendships and relationships of sexual intimacy all contribute to social freedom (2014, p. 132). Friendship is the safe space of mutuality and the pre-condition for a well-lived life (p. 138). Honneth is critical of legal, political and other spheres (including work) that do not support the values that are achievable through interpersonal relations.

Social freedom is also connected to the sphere of markets that offer forms of co-operative activities in the interest of all participants and these involve offering goods for sale as well as jobs. In markets there are consumer rights; regulations as to what can be sold and how; regulations about pricing, wages, imports, illegal commodities, etc. There are also regulations about fairness in business transactions (2014, p. 202). Honneth outlines a series of changes in society that have contributed to disconnecting markets from social freedom and he asserts that neoliberalism does not increase or support social freedom (2014, pp. 176-177) and is a social mis-development. This makes more explicit comments about thte kinds of learning and actions that would be emancipatory.

The most important sphere of social freedom is what he calls the 'We' of democratic will formation (2014, p. 253). This leads to his theory of democracy where democratic interactions enable citizens to make their lives and conditions better through a process of dialogue that is democratic will formation (2014, p. 254). This suggests that learning (and teaching) for the development of the 'we' of democratic discourse may be a vital task of education and a necessary one for transformative learning and places dialogue at the centre of transformative lesaerning. This is a re-statement in emancipatory language of the potential involved in the dialogues of transformative learning.

Social movements have been important in enhancing democratic moments of the public sphere and current indignations and insurgent social movements in places such as Barcelona, Athens and Wall Street are typical of the expanded 'we' that are, in Honneth's view, examples of spheres of social freedom. Only through agreed and mutually supportive cooperations with others can there be political freedom. Freedom of this kind is inherently social as it cannot be realized unless one is involved in the 'we' of democratic will formation where the same weight is afforded to all contributions of citizens (p. 261). This is reminiscent of Dewey's affirmation that 'democracy is a name for a way of life of free and enriching communication' (Dewey, 1954, p. 148), in other words dialogue. A new vision of TL would involve supporting through pedagogy a collaborative environment that supported and taught and indeed learned how to be democratic.

Implications and Discussion
Transformative learning theory has followed the communicative turn of Habermas (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 64-99). I suggest that TL might now follow the recognition turn as well as the freedom turn of Honneth. Transformative learning is critical of presuppositions; aims to create discursive spaces for dialogue in which the force of the better argument is the only force and in which all have full and equal rights to participate freely in democratic will-formation. Transformative learning requires critical reflection and now recognition becomes central to the learning process including critical reflection. TL offers freredom and Honneth explains how this emancipatory interest is realised.

In order to engage in the critical dialogues associated with transformative learning we now assert that the formation of democratic dialogue requires three forms of self-relating. We need caring individuals (teachers) and these are produced through and by those with self-confidence. It requires recognition of the reciprocal nature of legal rights and, as one might anticipate, a person who possesses self-respect (the capacity to know one's own rights) is better able to recognize the rights of others. And thirdly, a democratic discursive society requires the reciprocal recognition provided by work and solidarity. Dialogues of this kind enhance recognition.

This 'recognition turn' suggests strongly that the high rationality of the critique required by transformative learning is 'softened' by this understanding of the interpersonal recognition that underpins the democratic dialogue of a learning environment. Teaching might usefully address the struggles for recognition that function as motivations for TL. Without altering the importance of critical reflection for transformative learning there is now the possibility of reframing transformation theory so that rational discourse or dialogue is based on an interpersonal process of recognition that builds self-confidence, self-respect, self-esteem. Democratic participation is an important means of self-development that produces individuals who are more tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity and better able to engage in dialogue (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). This enhances the emancipatory potential of TL.

The previously referred to individualism of Mezirow's theory can now be reframed as a fundamentally intersubjective process of mutual respect and recognition. These relations of mutuality are preconditions for self-realization, critical reflection and transformative learning. Recognition and emancipation are connected; recognition becomes the foundation on which communicative action, emancipatory learning and social change are based. This implies that learning is best supported by interactions that explicitly recognize the individual worth of each individual along with the aspirations and dreams that prompt their struggle for recognition.

The process of transformative learning commences with a 'disorienting dilemma' and includes a phase or stage where one's individual 'problem' becomes identified with a significant social issue (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). In Mezirow's work this dilemma normally involves a disconnect or discomfort between old inadequate frames of reference and the possibility offered by new ones. The dilemma is about whether to stay in a world circumscribed by old experiences of misrecognition or respond to the struggle to be recognized through learning. The dilemma for the learner is whether to stay with old ways of making meaning that have lost their ability to usefully guide understanding and action or search for new ones. The struggle for recognition acts as a disorienting dilemma. It motivates the search for new meaning schemes and identities. The struggle for recognition is a form of perplexity and has within it the possibility that this may be the paradigmatic form of disorienting dilemma.

A further step in the transformative process involves making connections between one's individual problem (that may have prompted learning) and broader social issues. It is now suggested from this study of Honneth that personal problems are intimately connected to broader social issues. The connection is not just an empirically grounded finding in TL but is a philosophically important and essential step in interpreting the world. The personal is indeed political but now, relying on Honneth, the political is personal, and the TL process necessarily involves the making of this connection. TL requires the ability to perceive the world in this way – the personal and political and social are connected.

Transformative learning, at least as articulated by Mezirow, has always been grounded in critical theory that aims to understand society with an emancipatory intent. Emancipation is also the aim of transformative learning. Social freedom becomes a well founded aim of education for adults in family relationships, in communities, in legal and public policy contexts and also in the world of work. This enhances the emancipatory agenda of TL that now becomes a learning project with the practical intent of increasing freedom, justice, and equality in the spheres of family, law and work and it requires transformation not just of the individual but of society also.

It is the important to attend to teaching as a process of mutual recognition between teacher and learner. With the current emphasis on functional learning, competency and behavioral outcomes in education, and a neo-liberal inspired valorization of the market as the ultimate supplier of all needs, these ideas take seriously the contribution of intersubjectivity as important for teaching, learning and transformation and as an antidote for dominant models that give primacy to the imperatives and demands of the economy. The motivation to engage in learning becomes less economic, functional and instrumental and more communicative, social and potentially transformative and emancipatory. This is achieved not just by an emphasis on critical reflection but on the always presupposed imperative of interpersonal recognition.

Many in today's society may well have exchanged an active participatory role in the market place and in politics for greater comfort and occupational security offered by capitalism, which legitimates the social order in this way. This is a form of socially constructed silence and what is needed is ideology critique addressing this systematically distorted communication and misrecognition. The very foundation of democracy is under threat from the monopoly of technical reason in our society. The forces of technical control must be made subject to the consensus of acting citizens who in dialogue redeem the power of reflection and intersubjectivity. Educators have found in Habermas a social critique with which to

analyze the dominance in education of technique and instrumental rationality. The preoccupation, as a result of such critique, would shift from prioritizing how to get things done to realizing genuine democracy. By including the third generation of critical theorists recognizing that the struggle of people to exercise their rights to learn is developmental and a necessary condition for emancipation and transformative learning.

Habermas prompts us to see learning as a community in dialogue and we are most rational when we participate in communities characterized by free and unconstrained dialogue. The critical reflection on assumptions and practices in education is central to this. For self-understanding to be reached in dialogue democracy is necessary and for democracy recognition is presupposed. To do its work (of critique) adult education creates the very conditions necessary for a democratic society. Transformative learning and freedom are gained through dialogue. Above all, education would be redefined as an exercise in democracy, that teaches democracy and aims to reproduce more democracy in classrooms, communities, the work place and society.

The aim of education is to develop and respond to the needs of a democratic society. For Honneth it involves the recognition of student desires and also the political recognition of their desires and learning aspirations through which they wish to live the good life. Such adult education would create a democracy and in the process teach democracy and create a democratic society. In this it would make a contribution to a society in danger of being over whelmed by neoliberalism. And Freire may have agreed.

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