

## **Toward a Living Theory of Transformative Learning: Going beyond Mezirow and Habermas to Honneth<sup>1</sup>**

Ted Fleming

June 6, 2016

Patrick Modiano the French writer won the 2014 Nobel Prize for Literature. In his novels he tell stories of people who during the Second World War and afterwards were displaced or lost and who left only traces of their lives in documents or in the memories of people whom they met. His short novels try to trace the missing narratives of people's lives – sometimes the narrator is searching for their own displaced past and other times looking for the lost life stories of others. Novels such as *Missing Person* (2005) and *Dora Bruder* (2014) capture the struggles of people for acknowledgement; to reclaim selves that were lost; their struggles for identity; to become someone. They may be extreme examples but are typical of what war (any war) does.

But in this Mezirow Memorial Lecture maybe I should not start with Modiano in France. I do want to start in Ireland in 1997 when I was living in a small village by the Atlantic Ocean in Ireland and for many reasons I had a serious desire to leave Ireland, learn more and study adult education. I wrote to Toronto University and to Jack Mezirow at Teachers College! Jack answered by asking me why I would want to undertake such a venture. I wrote a two page list of questions that I wanted to explore mostly about education, higher education, teaching adults and the role of adult education in a community. I arrived at the corner of Broadway and 120<sup>th</sup> and first thing I noticed was *Mens sana in corpore sano* engraved in the stones on the building. Having come from a university system that required Latin for entry, I was strangely at home.

From that moment in 1978 and for over 30 years we worked and exchanged writings; visited; jogged in Riverside Park and loved Edee who inspired his Theory of Perspective Transformation through her study of Herbert Fingarette (1963) at Sarah Lawrence College.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fleming, T. (June 6, 2016). Toward a living Theory of Transformative Learning: Going beyond Mezirow and Habermas to Honneth. This is the text of the 1<sup>st</sup> Mezirow Memorial Lecture at Columbia University Teachers College sponsored by AEGIS IXX, the Department of Organization and Leadership and the Office of Alumni Relations at Teachers College.

Her contribution to the genesis of the theory is significant and it reminds me of how often Paulo Freire also acknowledged the contribution of his wife Elsa to his work.

It is indeed a singular honour to be invited here to recall Jack Mezirow (and Edee) and his work. I do want to acknowledge the wonderful invitation and welcome from AEGIS IXX and Joan Bigham, from Victoria Marsick and Lyle York. And finally, the involvement of the current Adult Learning and Leadership cohort at Teachers College especially Julie.

In a very few years from the mid-1970s Jack Mezirow defined a field. He redefined adult learning theory. Whether you agree or disagree with his theory and how it is understood or applied, his contribution cannot be ignored around the world. We have been fortunate to have lived and worked with both Paulo Freire and Jack whose work lifted the field of adult learning and adult education in monumental fashion. The legacy is a major one and it requires our best efforts to progress it, critically develop it and ensure it remains a living theory.

There are of course a number of reasons why Jack's work has been so well received.

Adult educators, academics and above all students very quickly acknowledged that TL names their experience of being involved in education and learning. The theory has that ability to name something for ordinary people who may not be hugely interested in studying Freire or Habermas. It was accessible.

The theory was also well grounded in a widely acknowledged and reputable set of ideas including Paulo Freire and Jürgen Habermas and many more (Mezirow, 1991).

It was readily applied in a wide variety of settings and one only has to look through the various publications (Taylor, Cranton and Associates, 2012) and the Transformative Learning Conference papers to see how areas such as prison education, business environments, women's studies.

This led to the theory being empirically tested, validated, critiqued, elaborated and above all helping to inform the pedagogy of so many practitioners who in the 1970s (and since) have been in search of teaching methods that might lead towards what Freire and Mezirow proposed as the most significant kind of adult learning.

I have spoken this way with personal and general comments so as to prompt in this moment a reflection on your own learning and teaching and indeed engagement with Teachers College. I am proposing that you continue to keep in touch with your learning roots, with your learning colleagues in AEGIS IXX (who are the hosts of this Mezirow Memorial Lecture) and with your desire for lifelong learning. I am suggesting that there is the potential in this AEGIS group and in this place to nurture your curiosity for a long time.

I am interested, as you can hear, in the stories of Modiano and the struggle for identity of his characters and I am reminded of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* where Claudia is explaining how she hates Shirley Temple dolls. These dolls are a representation of the world of things to be possessed and a reminder of how white dolls are given as presents to black children. She destroyed these dolls:

...nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Had any adult with the power to fulfil my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been 'Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?' I could have spoken up, 'I wanted to sit on a low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.' The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of peach, perhaps, afterwards.

(Morrison, 1990, p. 15)

The ability to acknowledge and hear the other person, especially their desires, thoughts and feelings is at the core of teaching and of transformative learning. This is like what Maxine Greene said when she described teaching as becoming 'the friend of someone else's mind' (Rothman, 2007). I am also reminded of Lyle York's (2016) recent article in the *Adult Education Quarterly* where he and Elizabeth Kasl set out to rethink the importance of empathy. This is central to what I want to say today.

What would I like to say about transformative learning itself? Assuming you are well tutored, well read and indeed an expert in transformative learning let me say this:

Each one of us – like me coming around the corner of Broadway onto 1205 St. – has a meaning making apparatus that makes sense and meaning of what we see and experience and we interpret that situation. This is what we do. I can imagine my brain as at least in part a large filing cabinet with many drawers packed with meanings from my own unique life, from my culture. Imagine each drawer having a label. One may be labelled white and is packed with ‘white’ meanings. Another may be labelled male and full of male meanings. These drawers of meanings are connected (as are all drawers, possibly) so that a whole range of white male meanings are available to me. Another may be labelled religion. Even if I am an atheist, my atheism is an Irish Catholic Atheism. Other drawers may be European, middle class, and each drawer is packed full of ready-made meanings developed through life, working and through engagement in society. In another layer to the complexity of the filing cabinet metaphor (limited and mechanical indeed) identified by Mezirow is the ability of the cabinet to produce, invent and create meanings – it is not just a storage device like a computer hard drive. It produces its own meanings. They are not often critiqued, but are convenient, accessible, and available when needed to interpret a situation or event. Prejudices, misunderstandings and false meanings too live usually together for long times. However, some times the meanings do not work, do not fit, even a whole drawer may be causing discomfort and do not work very well. This is a dilemma. And it may trigger the thoughtful adult to change and look for better stuff to pack into the filing cabinet. But the ability to examine any part of the meaning making apparatus is limited and inaccessible as soon as we approach them for critique or scrutiny. To examine the collection of meanings and the ‘manufacturing’ process requires something akin to Marx’ critique of ideology or Freud’s psychoanalysis.

This dilemma that disturbs and disorients is two things;

1. A first step on the way to our own transformative learning;
2. A situation precipitated by a teacher or change agent who wants to facilitate transformative learning among students.

By supporting and encouraging adults to wonder, to puzzle them or make them disoriented about what they take for granted is part of the process or transformation. It demands

imagination of the teacher and as Dewey said, imagination helps us 'break through the inertia of habit and of habitual thinking' (Dewey, 1934, p. 272). He proposed teaching for break through moments. Picasso also knew this and used his art for this purpose. Picasso said about painting;

You have to wake people up. To revolutionise their way of identifying things. You've got to create images they won't accept...Force them to understand that they're living in a pretty queer world. A world that is not reassuring. A world that's not what they think it is.

(Malraux, 1974, p. 110)

Jack Mezirow's contribution was to outline the process of changing these meanings, changing drawers and filling cabinet by starting with disorienting dilemmas, and moving through the 10 phases of transformation (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168-169). This changing of perspectives was already known about in the 1970s and is found in Fingarette (1963) and Kelly (1963) and Edee Mezirow. Jack's originality was to locate these ideas in an adult education environment.

One of the main foundations on which TL is built is provided by Habermas. He provides well thought out ideas on;

The emancipatory interest (Habermas, 1972) that generated emancipatory knowledge and by implication illuminated Mezirow's emancipatory learning;

Critical reflection (Habermas, 1972) as the analytical tool that could engage in an archeology of knowledge and of assumptions;

A kind of discourse that is free, open and rational. It is like a special kind of democratic debate of great equality where the only force at play is the force of the better argument. It was the kind of adult learning group best suited to transformative learning.

Part of the reason for this generous invitation to deliver this inaugural Mezirow Memorial Lecture may be because I have been exploring the implications that the next generation of critical theorist after Habermas might have for transformation theory. I have tried to find a way of going beyond Habermas and Mezirow. The story of this begins like this: Take an

infant or young child. No one will survive without the adult/carer/parent who provides security. This is Bowlby's attachment theory (Fleming, 2007). A secure attachment is achieved by responding to and acknowledging the feelings, thoughts and experiences of the child with empathy and support. Look at how any child responds to being acknowledged. If you praise a child they grow, develop in confidence and ability. Such moments of interpersonal recognition are developmental. Without this it is not possible to become a person with values and abilities and be able to be part of debates, discussions and engage in critical reflection. Self-realization can only be achieved through interpersonal relationships and are a precondition for engaging in public life and democracy.

These are not just essential experiences of childhood. We require and need recognition throughout our lives – not in a childish way certainly but in ways appropriate for adults. We are, as adults, also recognised in other domains such as law and work and as we grow recognition continues to be important – both to receive it and to give it. Laws that, for instance, give people rights to education or give disabled people rights to equal treatment or laws that allow gay people marry are ways in which society institutionally acknowledges the diverse individuality of the members of society. At work too we may be recognised for our achievements, productivity, imagination or contribution to the aims of the organisation. These recognitions of adults are also developmental. Recognition is essentially interpersonal. I cannot do it alone.

The struggle for recognition, according to Honneth (1995), is a fundamental drive for survival and development. Its importance is clearer when we think of the potential that misrecognition has to cramp, limit and undermine development. Examples include the denial of rights and incidents at work that involve slights, comments that undermine, ignoring those with whom we disagree, shunning and exclusions. Honneth is clear that the current form of neo-liberal capitalism is a form of misrecognition (Honneth, 2014, p. 239).

According to Honneth, the struggle for recognition drives social change. When the EU funded RANLHE research team studied non-traditional students returning to higher education across Europe it became clear that the driving force and motivation in some places was for recognition (RANLHE, 2010). People wanted their intelligence, their abilities to be recognised and they believed that education was able to do that. Distortions in their

identity motivated them to return to education (Fleming and Finnegan, 2014). Though not as disconnected or as fragmented and broken as Modiano's characters they nevertheless had a desire for recognition, to be someone, and be validated for their knowledge and intelligence – this is why graduations are so important, they are public, social and definitive moments of profound personal and social recognition. Their dilemma was this: whether to remain in a job or in a position where they were either misrecognised or sometimes not able to reach their potential or to struggle to have their abilities, desires, intelligences recognised in education. The disorienting dilemma was whether to struggle or not for recognition. This was the beginning of a journey of transformative learning and I am coming to the conclusion that the struggle for recognition is akin to and maybe a form of disorienting dilemma. Critical reflection and transformative learning become, in this understanding, interpersonal activities and learning is then less inclined to be defined as an individual phenomenon.

Transformative learning and communicative action involve more than following linguistic rules of discourse (Habermas, 1987) and involve mutuality and intersubjectivity (Honneth, 1995). The antidote to being too individualistic lies in the critical theory foundations of transformation theory as articulated by both Habermas and Honneth. The struggle for recognition, based on experiences of disrespect and the need for self-esteem, 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.

(Honneth, 1995, p. 92)

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

So already we have disorienting dilemmas and critical reflection being rethought in ways that soften the edge of critical reflection and that rethink the disorienting dilemma.

One more re-think is possible with the aid of Axel Honneth. Emancipation has always been core to critical theory and the work of Habermas, Freire and Mezirow. Now with Honneth's reworking of Hegel (Honneth, 2014) it is possible to go beyond the emancipatory interest of

Habermas who offers distorted communication (misunderstanding) as the pathology of the age to Honneth who offers mis-recognitions as the pathology of this neoliberal era. Family relationships, work the economy and the political sphere all offer the possibility of emancipation in various ways but are in essence dependent on each other to do this. Recognition is the key to understanding and achieving emancipation. Many critiques of Honneth have contributed to the elaboration of his ideas and further studies may enhance the implications for the transformative learning process. These debates typically concern whether redistribution of resources (Fraser and Honneth, 2003) or recognition is the fundamental aim of social change and more recently whether democracy is a consensus (Habermas and Honneth) or a more confrontational activity as in Rancière (Genel and Derante, 2016).

In the early work of Mezirow he focussed on technical knowledge and interpersonal understanding as two domains of knowledge and learning (Habermas, 1972). Each had its own pedagogy. But transformative learning was like meta learning or a superstructure where critical questions were asked about what was taken for granted in the domains of technical and practical learning. In the audacious step of saying the transformative learning was emancipatory or a form of freedom Mezirow built on the firm foundation of Habermas. Mezirow offered freedom from distorted communications (or as Habermas would say: distorted communication is the pathology of this capitalist age). But if we go with the new third generation of critical theorists and Honneth we begin to see that distorted recognition in a neoliberal capitalist world is the pathology to be addressed – addressed in the three domains of family (or the intimate sphere of interpersonal relationships), work and politics.

If I were asked to apply TL or give examples of how TL might be applied or how it might be of use in say a business environment there are a number of aspects that jump into our attention:

Primarily, and of most importance in an age that demands practical solutions and outcomes, having the theory right is the most practical one can be. Without theory there is only activity, without a well-worked out set of ideas one has no way of setting out aims and targets or of evaluating them.



People in organizations, workers, managers, owners themselves are packed filling cabinets of unquestioned assumptions and habits of mind and perspectives and basic assumptions that may or may not serve them well. These include assumptions about people, practices, areas of expertise (HR, accounting, marketing and management), how to lead people, how groups of people work together in a team, how authority is exercised. The very notions of authority and power are examples of areas that cry out to be explored, and reinvigorated with new understandings that could underpin practice. Questions about ethics and values are also important. Banks all over the world have been feral over recent years. Not just in Wall Street, but in Greece and Ireland and many other places. Finally, in a profit driven environment, how might other environmental issues be fore-fronted and given due recognition. All these may require transformative learning.

And then Axel Honneth adds another layer of understanding by suggesting that the most basic need and indeed missing ingredient in our pursuit of the good life is recognition. Family, business and politics all offer freedom but only when all do so in a way that each relies and depends on the other do we get full value for our desire for emancipation. Questions about how people, all employees might or might not be recognised are now increasingly important. The work of Honneth, independently of the implications for transformation theory, provides a rationale for recognition and its developmental importance for individuals and organizations.

One final piece of Mezirow's theory (I have not tried to give an account of it all) can also be re-configured now. He always insisted that learning had not occurred or indeed the transformation had not been complete until one acted on the basis of the new set of assumptions. These new assumptions were more integrative of experience, more inclusive and more open to being changed in future. Now in this Honneth era, we might suggest that the action to emerge from a learning transformation would be more recognitions, teachers would recognise their student's questions and the interpersonal dimension of teaching/learning, work with students' deeply held desires to learn, to get a second chance, to experience someone who befriended their mind, who asked them what they really wanted for Christmas! It requires someone who recognises their lifelong pursuit of recognition that is most certainly a precondition for emancipation. Teachers and leaders

who have experienced this recognition themselves are in a better position to deliver this. I asked you earlier to recall the value of your own moments of recognition here (as I did mine) because this is a precondition for emancipation and freedom.

This also assists us reconfigure the age old conflict between structure and agency. We are accustomed to saying that the personal is political. In this Honneth work the political is personal. A good example is to look at how we present ourselves on social media, e.g. Facebook. We do need to see that my photos and public posts are not only mine, my personal self but are me as socially acceptable. The social world impacts on how the personal is presented. It is socially acceptable to be warm and cuddly with a dog or cat on Facebook but how this expresses itself in other domains of life is crucial – in laws, in work places and in this context in classrooms and seminars. It is certainly worth returning to the roots of transformative learning theory and playing with these ideas in the new environment of today's critical theory. It would also be worth looking again at Goffman's work (1959) and Berger and Luckman (1966) – fifty years ago!

Finally, I recall this Maya Angelou poem that seems to understand the struggle for recognition and how it is connected to emancipation and freedom.

The free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wings  
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 fearful trill  
of the 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.

Maya Angelou, *The Caged Bird*

## References

- Berger, P. & Luckman, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Fingarette, H. (1963). *The self in transformation: Psychoanalysis, philosophy and the life of the spirit*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fleming, T. (2002). Habermas on civil society, lifeworld and system: Unearthing the social in Transformation Theory. *Teachers College Record*, 2002, 1-17. <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=10877>
- Fleming, T. (2007). Picking wild orchids and windflowers: Attachment theory and adult education. In B. Connolly, T. Fleming, D. McCormack & A. Ryan, (Eds.), *Radical Learning for Liberation 2*, (pp. 79-94). Maynooth: MACE.
- Fleming, T. (2008). A secure base for adult learning: Attachment theory and adult education. *The Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult Education*, 25, 33-53.
- Fleming, T. & Finnegan, F. (2014) Critical theory and non-traditional student experience in Irish higher education. F. Finnegan et al., (eds.). *Student voices on inequalities in European higher education: Challenges for policy and practice in a time of change* (pp. 51-62). London: Routledge.
- Fraser, N. & Honneth, A. (2003). *Redistribution or recognition? A political-philosophical exchange*. London: Verso.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

- Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests*. Boston: Beacon.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action, Vol 1: Reason and the rationalization of society*. Boston: Beacon.
- Honneth, A. (1995). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Honneth, A. (2014). *Freedom's right: The social foundations of democratic life*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Genel, K. and Derante, J-P. (Eds.). (2016). *Recognition or disagreement: A critical encounter on the politics of freedom, equality and identity – Axel Honneth and Jacques Rancière*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Malraux, A. (1974). *Picasso's mask*. London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2007). Adult education for empowerment and community development. In B. Connolly, T. Fleming, D. McCormack and A. Ryan (eds.). *Radical learning for liberation 2*, (pp. 9-18). Maynooth, IRL: MACE.
- Modiano, P. (2005). *Missing person*. Jaffrey, NH: Godine.
- Modiano, P. (2014). *Dora Bruder*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Morrison, T. (1990). *The bluest eye*. London: Picador.
- RANLHE (2010). Retrieved June 20, 2015 from <http://www.dsw.edu.pl/fileadmin/www-ranlhe/>
- Rothman, T. (2007). <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2007/april/becoming-friends-of-someone-elses-mind/>
- Taylor, E.W., Cranton, P. and Associates (2012). *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- York, L. and Kasl, E. (2016). Do I really know you? Do you really know me? Empathy amid diversity in differing learning contexts. *Adult Education Quarterly February*, 66, 3-20.