Transformative Learning and Higher Education:
Making Critical Theory Useful.

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Abstract

Transformative learning (TL) was grounded in empirical studies of mature students returning to college and in the communicative action of Habermas. This paper updates TL theory relying on Axel Honneth who has reinterpreted Habermas's critical theory. Honneth grounds critical theory and critical reflection in intersubjectivity. This update involves: a reconfigured relationship between personal and social learning (the political is personal); a reinterpretation of TL's disorienting dilemma as a struggle for recognition; and a reinterpretation of the way TL supports identifying ones' personal problems with broader social issues. It supports a reframing of an agenda for universities that find themselves in a neoliberal bind and a reconstructed critical theory points to ways of being a university - not just about jobs and economic development but as an antidote to dominant ideology. A new vision for HE supports human development, democracy and freedom.

Introduction

Universities trace their origins to monastic and cathedral schools in 6th century when all over Europe princes and cities created universities to satisfy a thirst for knowledge and pursued the social benefits of their scholarship. Rulers believed that the scholarly expertise of universities would assist in addressing difficult intellectual and social problems (Grendler, 2004). The contribution of universities to the scientific revolution and to important philosophical debates and medical progress is widely acknowledged. In the 18th Century Humboldt in Germany and Murray and Curran in Great Britain as well as John Henry Newman in the 19th Century made significant contributions to defining the agenda, mission and structures of HE.

In recent times the field of education has been enriched by significant contributions to the understanding of education, adult education and higher education. Paulo Freire and Jack Mezirow provided the core of this support for adult education. Freire in his discussions with Myles Horton (Horton and Adams, 1975; Horton and Freire, 1990) defined the influential and innovative Hylander Folk School that made significant contributions to the civil rights movement in US but had a lesser impact on higher education. Higher education remains in general, a traditional institution with significant rigidities.

From the beginning universities were part of the process of making society better places, people more productive and supporting the growth and development of its students. Today this project is influenced by neoliberal economic imperatives that define the context of higher education.

This paper will look at the implications of the work of Axel Honneth for the theory of transformative learning that had its origins in a study of adults returning to college (Mezirow, 1978). From the beginning Mezirow relied on Habermas for key insights such as communicative action and an understanding of the kinds of discussions and debates that would support transformative learning. These ideas (Mezirow and Habermas) have implications for a vision of higher education. Now as the next generation of critical theorists (e.g. Axel Honneth) has made important contributions it is opportune to identify the implications of this iteration of critical theory for transformative learning and higher education.

The idea that going to college is not just about a job, a career or maximizing one's salary appears to be under threat in new ways in this era of neoliberalism, that attempts to subordinate education to the economy. HE is now clearly asked to be subordinate to the markets and the emerged 'neoliberal knowledge regime' (Holmwood, 2014, p. 62). The Bologna Process, now rebranded as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), creates a European-wide university system so that degrees are made, along with European culture, more appealing for other (non-EU) countries (Holford, 2014, p. 14). The EHEA makes HE an export business (Holford, 2014). The often quoted but much ignored social dimension of both HE and lifelong learning (CEC, 2000) fell short of the declared policy ambition and the EU practice never matched the rhetoric (Holford, 2014, p. 22).

The Context
According to Harvey (2005, p. 2) 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.

Austerity is a public policy response to financial crises in many countries (Greece, UK, Ireland) and is first and foremost a transfer of wealth from the lower and middle classes to

the classes above them and is an opportunity to further the neoliberal project of increasing inequality under the guise of freeing lower socio-economic groups from their social welfare supported unwillingness to work. This is a capitalist class project and is part of the neo-liberal system (Giroux, 2014; Watson, 2015). In this environment education 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'.

Transformative Learning

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is an important way of understanding the possibilities that can be realized through adults returning to learning and college. One's ways of making meaning, usually built on a set of unquestioned assumptions, through transformative learning become clarified, assessed and new more open and integrative sets of assumptions are sought, integrated and acted upon.

 For Mezirow (2000, pp. 7-8) transformative learning 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.

Mezirow relies heavily on the theory of communicative action of Habermas whose theory of democratic debate involves particular kinds of conversations that were free, open and participatory - particularly as they relied solely on the reasonableness of the arguments being made. The only power was that of the most reasonable argument (Fleming, 2002). Habermas and his ideas have served Mezirow's work well but if the connection between critical theory and transformation theory is to be maintained then the next generation of critical theorists (beyond Habermas) may have interesting insights that may further enhance our understanding of adult learning and particularly as it is realized in a vision for higher education.

Axel Honneth?

Axel Honneth was a student of Habermas, and is now Director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and Professor of Humanities at Columbia University, New York. He sets out to refocus critical theory by seeing distorted communications (Habermas) as disrespect. The

communicative turn of Habermas (1987) becomes the recognition turn of Honneth (1995, p. 262). Denials of recognition that result in indignations and shame drive social struggles for recognition and social freedom (2014, p. 326). He continues to assert with other critical theorists 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)

The project of emancipatory philosophy has to be entirely reimagined and to do this he foregrounds a theory of intersubjectivity and the 'struggle for recognition' as the crucial mooring points for the future of critical theory. Honneth argues;

> the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee.

(Honneth, 1995, p. 92).

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 distorted communication.

The pathologies of subject formation in late capitalism are expressed in struggles to be recognized by significant others and self-realization, that can only be achieved through interpersonal relations.

Only by taking the perspective of others towards oneself can one begin to construct a sense of self (Mead, 1934, p. 151). The perspectives of others are shaped by culture and life history and by internalizing these the individual grows. Later, as a socialized adults, one is capable of adult thoughts and actions and one can be reflexive of inherited values; evaluate and critique them; decide on their justification and adequacy and alter them in the light of

this reflection. This is exactly what Mezirow describes as the process of TL. The mission of HE can be built on these insights.

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

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

Distortions in identity are the 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 an alternative 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 becomes both personal and social (Fleming, 2014).

One's private relationships of love and attachment are a precondition for participation in political will formation, public life and democracy. Honneth 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)

Perspective taking is also essential for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, p. 104). Transformative learning and communicative action are always already more than the following of linguistic rules of discourse (Habermas, 1987, p. 121) and involve mutuality and intersubjectivity (Honneth, 1995, pp. 92-95). The antidote to being too individualistic lies in critical theory (that is a foundation for transformation theory also) as articulated by both Habermas and Honneth.

Honneth argues that there are three differentiated pathways to identity in modern society. The first form of relating is <u>self-confidence</u> 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 given in 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). If this essential ingredient of development is not available or a negative message about self-worth is given then the outcome is a potential hiatus or missing piece in the personality that may seek and find 'expression through negative emotional reactions of shame or anger, offence or contempt' (Honneth, 1995, p. 257).

The second type of relationship to self involves <u>self-respect</u>, when a person is given recognition as a morally and legally mature person. When a person is recognized at this level one is accepted as an autonomous person who has both a right and an ability to participate in the discussions and debates of the institution and organizations of society. Legal rights (e.g. gender equality) 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).

The third and highest form of recognition, according to Honneth, is provided through work and whether the community honors one's contribution through work. This experience leads to a form of self-relation that he calls <u>self-esteem</u>. Relationships of solidarity with others in work and other collaborative social activities enhance one's self esteem and one is recognized as having something to contribute to the community, 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 and in return loyalty and solidarity grow from this (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. Disrespect is destructive because it injures people '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 finally 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 but injuries are done to their understanding of themselves, their identity (Honneth, 1995, p. 132). Misrecognitions resulting from violations of rights that are framed in laws and in other legal protections is disrespect.

The third form of disrespect points to cultural norms that ignore or denigrate ways of life. For example, ethnic minorities know denigration blocks the development of a healthy self-esteem. Without rights, their ways of being human are not valued and this impacts on the options for self-relating that are constructive for the citizens involved.

Honneth brings private matters to the centre of sociological attention. Social change is driven by inadequate forms of recognition and the struggle for recognition becomes a form of social praxis. 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 his iteration of 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 reconfigured. In his rethinking of Hegel, Mead, Winnicott and Habermas the argument is rethought as to how the social and the personal may be kept in intimate connection. As in much of critical theory the best solution is understanding structure and agency as connected in dialectical ways.

The Freedom Turn of Honneth

In 1967 at a lecture at the Free University of Berlin Habermas spoke of universities as public spheres (Habermas, 1970, pp. 1-12). Neither he nor Honneth have departed from the importance of the idea of deliberative democracy. New knowledge is created in the open free speech of democratic discussion and a vibrant public sphere remains a core idea. These ideas are of particular interest to educators looking for new ways of expressing a counter possibility for universities rather than the dominant neoliberal academy. But he 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 any 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 – all of whom correspond to the ideals institutionalized in our society – mutually influence each other, because the properties of one cannot be realized without those of the other two.

> (Honneth, 2014, p. 330-1)

This is reminiscent of Paulo Freire's dependence on Hegal (Freire, 1972) and if Freire stands on the shoulders of Hegel so too does Honneth. From the first sentence of *Freedom's Right* (Honneth, 2014) 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....

> (Honneth, 2014, p. 15)

As one might anticipate, individual and social freedom are connected – and not in some vague or superficial way but essentially. 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, work, laws, are all justified only if they promote, support and bring about a free society for all. These institutions 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 (though not referred to by Honneth) are part of that emancipatory project.

In *Freedom's Right* Honneth (2014) reorients critical theory to focus on freedom rather than on recognition (Honneth, 2014, p. 337). In order to realize social freedom: individuals must be able to view each other's freedom as a condition for their own (2014, p. 60); members of a free society are defined as free by their ability to enhance and initiate mutual recognition

(2014, p. 261); the condition of social freedom involves the expectation and obligations of relational institutions that must be agreed on by all members in reflexive discourse (2014, p. 59). This has implications for HE policy and pedagogy and indeed for transformative learning.

Social freedom is also connected to the sphere of markets that offer goods for sale and 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.

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 discourse or 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 higher education.

Freedom is inherently social as it cannot be realized if one is not 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). It is also clearly built on the Theory of Communicative Action of Habermas (1987). In this scheme interpersonal relations, the markets, work and democratic relations provide the social conditions needed to improve social and living conditions (Honneth, 2014, p. 274). A new vision of higher education would involve supporting through tuition, seminars and its entire pedagogy and indeed management a new collaborative environment that supported and taught and indeed learned how to be democratic in this way.

Implications and Discussion

These ideas of Honneth have had little impact on education apart from a few (Brown and Murphy, 2012; Huttunen, 2008; Murphy and Brown, 2012). Some work has been done on the connection with transformative learning (Fleming, 2014, 2016b, 2016c). Transformative learning theory as understood by Jack Mezirow has followed the communicative turn of Habermas (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 64-99). I suggest that this learning theory might now follow the recognition turn of Honneth. Transformative learning is critical of presuppositions; aims to create discursive spaces 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.

Teaching and Recognition

In order to engage in the critical discourse associated with transformative learning we now assert that the formation of democratic discussions requires three forms of self-relating. We need caring and loving individuals (teachers); recognition of the reciprocal nature of legal rights and a democratic discursive society.

This 'recognition turn' (in addition to the communicative turn of Habermas) 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 discourse of a learning environment. Teaching might usefully address the struggles for recognition as motivations for learning. Without altering the importance of communicative action or of critical reflection for transformative learning there is now the possibility of reframing transformation theory so that rational discourse is required to based on an interpersonal process of support and recognition that builds self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Mezirow (and Habermas) see democratic participation as an important means of self-development that produces individuals who are more tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity and better able to engage in discourse (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). It is important not to sink into a sentimental subjectivity here and this is a precondition for rational discourse without losing rigor or the ambition to remain within the emancipatory agenda of critical theory.

Transformation theory has a social dimension

The emphasis on whether learning is individual or social (Cranton, and Taylor, 2012) can now be re-configured similar to the way Freire reconfigured the dualisms of subject/object, teacher/learner, best expressed in his concept of praxis (1972, p. 75). 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 whether in transformative learning or in the lecture and seminar rooms of universities is best supported by interactions that are not only respectful but that explicitly recognize the individual worth of each individual along with the aspirations and dreams that prompt their struggle for recognition.

The pedagogy of transformative learning

The process of transformative learning commences with a 'disorienting dilemma' and includes a phase where one's individual 'problem' becomes identified with a major/significant social issue (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). This is akin to the understanding of philosophers who assert that wonder is the beginning of wisdom (e.g. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and A.N. Whitehead) and that perplexity is the beginning of knowledge (Dewey, 1997, p. 11). In Mezirow's work this perplexity normally involves a disconnect and discomfort between old inadequate frames of reference and the possibility offered by new ones. 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. It is clear that 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. The dilemma involves whether to stay in a world circumscribed by old experiences of misrecognition or respond to the struggle to be recognized and acknowledged through learning. This search for new meanings is found in social struggles, new social movements, in education and in higher education.

Another stage in the transformative process involves making connections between one's own individual problem (that may have prompted learning) and broader social issues. It is

now clear from this study of Honneth that the 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 the political is personal and the TL process necessarily involves the making of this connection. At an obvious level TL (and teaching in University) requires the ability to perceive the world in this way – the personal and political and social are connected.

Emancipation and adult learning

Transformative learning, at least as articulated by Mezirow, has always been grounded in critical theory with its priority for understanding 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 and business. This enhances the emancipatory agenda of transformations so that adult education now become a learning project with the practical intent of increasing freedom, justice, care and equality in the spheres of family, law and work it involves 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. Teaching that is informed in this way has the potential to strengthen identity development. 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. 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 recognition. It is possible to assert again the Kantian imperative that learning is for autonomy – and to understand this project again, as reclaiming an emancipatory potential of adult education and higher education that has the long standing intention of bringing about a better society in to live, grow and create

environments in which families can take care of children – and not a society as a place to work.

Empirical confirmations

In an EU funded study of non-traditional students returning to third level studies carried out across member states the concept of recognition was used to make meaning of the narratives of the students (RANLHE, 2010). In one country the longitudinal study collected over 100 narratives of students experiences and the dominant narrative of that journey that often commenced long before applying to go to college was one of having been systematically mis-recognized in school and the deeply felt and tangible desire and ambition to seek out HE as a place in which the student and their intelligence might be recognized. They held such places (HE colleges) in high esteem and valued the learning and degrees provided to such an extent that the researchers were able to conclude that HE was a real and legitimate and almost always a realized achievement of their recognition needs (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010, 2014, 2017).

A Mission for higher education

The critical role of education is to work in solidarity with workers and citizens to insert democratic imperatives into the system world. The very foundation of democracy is under threat (not only from a Trump version of neoliberalism) 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, shifts from prioritizing how to get things done to realizing genuine democracy. By adding this third generation of critical theorists the vision recognizing the struggle of people to exercise their rights to learn is developmental and a necessary condition for emancipation, transformative learning. The psychologization of education as an individual subjective learning process is a danger and the reliance on Honneth is mostly about securing a theoretical base for concepts that are intersubjective, political and social.

Habermas prompts us to see the university as a community of discursive reason or communicative praxis and we are most rational when we participate in communities

characterized by free and unconstrained discourse, i.e. democratic discourse. The critical reflection about assumptions and practices in various disciplines is central to this. For self-understanding to be reached in dialogue democracy is necessary and for democracy recognition is necessary. To do its work (of critique) the university is creating the very conditions necessary for a democratic society.

How might such a communicative university look? There would be less emphasis on hierarchical authority and more on participatory decision making; more dialogue than dictat; the elimination of corporate culture and the nourishing of self-government and a clear priority given to social justice by the institution. Pedagogy too should match this set of priorities. Social analysis, critical reflection, reconstructing the teacher-student relationship where both become co-investigators of reality acknowledging the mutuality of the teaching/learning process. 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.

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