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Transformative learning reconceptualized: Integrating the reading of literature and social imagination

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ABSTRACT

Many adult educators utilise literature to facilitate transformative learning, with an interest in exercising the imaginations of students and so offering an alternative to functional, economy-driven learning. I explore how literature, informed by a sociological imagination, fosters critical reflection and empathy. Drawing on the works of C. Wright Mills, Alfred Schutz, and John Dewey, alongside insights from critical theorist Oskar Negt, the paper outlines a rationale for literature's role in supporting the sociological imagination and transformative learning. It argues that imagination is crucial for critical reflection and envisioning alternative realities, thus making transformative learning possible. The paper addresses critiques of transformative learning's individualistic bias by emphasising the dialectical connection between the personal and broader societal issues, rooted in theories of sociological imaginations of Mills, Schutz and Negt. The importance of including a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the person and the social is highlighted as an important iteration for transformative learning thereby advancing transformation theory towards a critical theory of adult learning. The paper concludes with practical implications for educators, advocating for learning environments that are supportive challenging, and utilising creative materials to promote emotional engagement and critical transformative conversations.

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Many adult educators rely on literature to support teaching for transformative learning and for supporting the imaginations of learners. Such approaches offer an alternative to current preoccupations in adult education with more functional priorities and the lifelong learning agenda, that emphasises technical knowledge, and learning skills that support the economy. The approach here expands the concept of learning so that it includes the ability of students to imagine an alternative world, and creatively work for a better place to live and work. I explore the sociological imagination and how literature supports teaching for transformative learning informed by a sociological imagination. This paper is based on teaching graduate courses on transformative learning where students come from diverse fields such as health education, psychology, English literature, art and music education. This paper outlines a rationale for how reading literature

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supports the sociological imagination and, in doing so, reconceptualises the theory of transformative learning (TL).

The plan

This paper begins with an overview of transformative learning and a number of critiques that prompted its development. A brief review of the literature on facilitating TL through literature follows. The paper explores the sociological imagination, drawing on the works of C. Wright Mills, and Alfred Schutz. The contribution of critical theorist Oskar Negt is discussed; reconfiguring TL towards a critical theory of adult learning. Counter intuitively, the paper returns to John Dewey whose work on art and experience, is crucial but more importantly his work e allows me reinterpret his suggestion that rupture (or discontinuity of experience) is important for TL. A review of the literature on models, methods and illustrations of how TL is facilitated follows. The paper concludes with the author's insights and experiences of relying on fiction to support TL with a sociological imagination. The idea that political and personal dimensions of experience are connected – dialectically – helps reconceptualise TL.

What is transformative learning?

Transformative learning, pioneered by Jack Mezirow, is a process of critically reflecting on uncritically accepted assumptions and frames of reference that help to make meaning of experience (Mezirow, 1978). In a video interview (Bloom et al., 2015) Mezirow linked TL with the work of important critical thinkers such as Marx, Freud, Freire, and Socrates. He defined reflection, quoting John Dewey, as the process of assessing the justification for our beliefs. Critical reflection involves persistent and careful consideration of our knowledge and the evidence supporting it. According to Mezirow, learning is a process where; by reflecting on past experiences, we create new or revised interpretations that guide our actions. The meanings we rely on for interpreting reality are shaped by individual life histories and social influences, forming tacit belief systems or frames of reference. Transformative learning, according to Mezirow (1985) is the process of;

> becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of our psychoculturalassumptions has come to constrain the way in which we perceive our world, of reconstituting that structure in a way that allows us to be more inclusive and discriminating in our integrating of experience and to act on these new understandings . . . (p. 22)

The process of TL begins with a disorienting dilemma, an experience that challenges existing beliefs and disrupts frames of reference. This, it is argued by some scholars, can cause emotional discomfort or, as Dewey (1933) called it, an experience of perplexity: as 'thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a *forked-road situation* [italics in original], a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives' (p. 11). As unquestioned assumptions are critiqued, TL can be an uncomfortable process.

When frames of reference cease to serve us well, and cause disorientation, the search begins for the origins of the non-functioning frames and for new better functioning assumptions. This is followed by planned actions on the basis of new freely accepted

assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). New and better frames of reference are characterised as more inclusive; more discriminating of experience; and more open to future change (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). The phases of TL are, according to Mezirow (2000):

> A disorienting dilemma;
> Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;
> A critical assessment of assumptions;
> Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
> Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions;
> Planning a course of action;
> Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans;
> Provisional trying new roles;
> Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;
> A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives. (p. 22)

Mezirow borrowed ideas from Habermas (1971) in order to give his theory a sound theoretical base. These included domains of learning; critical reflection; and discourse. Mezirow's learning categories match the three knowledge constitutive interests of Habermas (1971) – instrumental, communicative and emancipatory (Mezirow, 1991). Instrumental learning refers to task-oriented problem-solving; exemplified by the empirical science. Communicative learning involves exploring how individuals express feelings, needs, and understanding oneself and others. Humanities and social sciences are examples of such studies. Mezirow (1989) states that emancipatory learning involves becoming aware of problematic assumptions underpinning either instrumental or communicative learning. The emancipatory interest impels us 'to identify and challenge distorted frames of reference' (Mezirow, 1991, p. 87) through critical reflection. This emancipatory learning is TL.

Critical reflection, undertaken in particular kinds of conversations called *discourse*, are the twin requirements for TL. Mezirow (2000), borrowing from Habermas, outlines the rules for discourse as: that all participants have

- Full accurate and complete information
- Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception
- Openness to alternative points of view: empathy and concern about how others think and feel
- The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively
- Greater awareness of the context of ideas and, more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own
- an equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse
- Willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgement as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgement. (pp. 13,14)

Like critical reflection, these discussions are demanding for participants, requiring emotional maturity, empathy, awareness, an ability not to be adversarial as well as an

ability to think or hold different contradictory thoughts at the same time. It emphasises consensus building; that may not be always possible (Mezirow, 2000). Reading and discussing literature can support critically reflective conversations.

Transformative learning: critiques and developmental responses

Scholars have critiqued TL in multiple ways. Clarke and Wilson (1991), Collard and Law (1989), Newman (2012), and later Cranton et al. (2012), argue that the theory has an inadequate understanding of the social dimension of learning. This prompted Mezirow to clarify and develop the theory. For instance, he was not asserted that critical reflection was absolutely necessary for TL. More intuitive ways of learning became acceptable as a route to TL. Critics assert that Mezirow's emphasis on the individual does not accurately represent the emphasis in Habermas's work. I understand this to mean that a sociological imagination is not fully integrated into TL.

Taylor and Cranton (2013) call attention to the high level of rationality required for TL; the demands of critical reflection; and the developmental dividend of engaging in the democratic process of discourse. Newman (2012) argues that the theory did not have adequate empirical grounding and is really a metaphor for learning, rather than a theory of learning. John Dirkx (2001) emphasises the emotional, imaginative, and 'soul work' dimensions of TL. He argues that emotions and imagination are integral to meaning-making and are important in facilitating TL. Engaging in various art forms such as narrative and poetry reflects a trend among these authors as they move TL beyond the linearity of cognitive processes, focus on the emotional aspects of TL (Boyd & Myers, 1988) and turn towards the arts to facilitate change.

Elizabeth Tisdell (2003) explores the integration of spirituality, culture, and social justice within TL; integrating mind, body and spirit. Her work leads her to assert that as assumptions are explored, increased awareness of systemic injustices will likely prompt learners to work for social change. Fleming's (2016) work on Axel Honneth which asserts that 'the personal is political but now the political is personal' (p. 69) provides a conceptual bridge for long-standing discussions regarding the individualistic bias of TL. Individual transformations are inextricably linked to societal struggles for recognition/justice (Fleming, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). He interprets disorienting dilemmas as struggles for recognition. Fostering TL necessarily involves personal dilemmas with their social contexts.

Hoggan et al. (2016) suggest that TL may have underplayed the importance of the sociological imagination. Newman (2012) argues that transformative learning (TL) does not take sufficient account of the socially constructed nature of personal development. He believes that TL facilitators must consider broader power dynamics, societal norms, and collective experiences that influence a person's frames of reference.

Brookfield (2009) emphasises how TL is a form of ideology critique – a process where individuals learn to recognise how unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in daily life. This critical awareness of how external factors shape internal beliefs leads to a more socio-culturally aware understanding of change. TL is not just for personal growth but also for social justice, challenging oppressive structures and fostering collective action. This development is driven by the growing importance of the sociological imagination, linking personal experiences to broader societal issues and problems.

Literature and transforming frames of reference: the literature

Using art, especially literature, to teach TL enhances vicarious experiences, empathy, and critical reflection. Facilitating TL often involves non-linear, not purely cognitive, and emotionally sensitive methods. Given the great diverse of contexts in which TL is today facilitated, a wide range of non-traditional teaching approaches are necessary. A number of such approaches are briefly reviewed.

Fisher-Yoshida, Geller, and Schapiro (2009) take TL beyond its traditional academic settings. Their model encourages participatory action research; coordinated management of meaning and communities of practice that support communication, conflict resolution and social change. They create space for learning; explored through the lens of culture, diversity and difference; and utilise the creative power of performing arts. Hoggan et al. (2009) focus on practical and accessible approaches to using creative expression with adult learners. They provide tools, methods and creative modalities that promote the deep personal change of TL. Imagination and literature are key, and include photography, movement, drama, and music.

Christine Jarvis (2003, 2012) describes how fiction and film uniquely contribute to TL by generating intense vicarious experiences. This fosters empathy and a deeper connection with characters, and situations that support actions to bring about change. For Jarvis, fiction sows the seeds of social change by increasing social class consciousness, gender issues, and cultural diversity. Literature engages the reader intensely with the characters and allows the reader identify with their situations; though their dilemmas may be difficult to resolve. By providing multiple perspectives and challenging our sense of self, literature actively stimulates and supports the sociological imagination, which ultimately challenges our psychological, socio-cultural, and epistemological meaning perspectives – an explicit reference to Mezirow's TL.

Tedford and Kitchenham (2021) describe an action research case study exploring how reading a particular book (a comic autobiography of John Lewis) facilitated TL in a postsecondary institution. This innovative project describes how to facilitate TL with accessible methodologies. Though the topic is about race in America, practical suggestions rather than theoretical concepts emerge. The role of fiction was also researched by Hoggan and Cranton (2015) who studied how reading fiction in higher education programs could facilitate TL. They found that reading fictional short stories promoted change, led to the emergence of new perspectives and fosters critical reflection.

Lawrence and Cranton (2015) and Lawrence (2017) study what happens when teachers read contemporary fiction to facilitate their own TL. This involved participants engaging in virtual dialogues with characters from novels they read. The selection of novels was crucial using works such as *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1983) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, (Hosseini). This innovative approach uncovered TL themes; leading to a new model of facilitating focussed on the process of what the authors describe as 'becoming conscious' (Lawrence, 2017, p. 7; Lawrence & Cranton, 2015, p. 53). The method helped the readers connect literary insights to their own lives and their adult education practices.

Patricia P. Gouthro (2018), along with Susan Holloway (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013; P. A. Gouthro & Holloway, 2018), use arts and fiction to facilitate TL. Gouthro's Habermas-informed critique of neoliberalism (2018) suggests that in our complex,

fluid and uncertain world, we need to broaden our perspectives and adult teaching methods by including fictional literature. She argues that fiction and other art forms offer sufficiently complex ways of accessing meanings, which enrich the possibilities of TL. Educators can thus help learners navigate a complex and changing world. Fiction and the arts in general offer non-linear ways of accessing meanings thus adding a rich layer to the TL possibilities and opportunities. Gouthro and Holloway as radical educators challenge us to teach how to think critically about social issues, political and economic structures, and cultural concerns. Drawing on interviews with fiction writers, they suggest that working with literature supports critical reflection in the three knowledge domains that Mezirow named as the technical-rational (by developing writing skills); interpersonal understanding (by personal/collective growth); and emancipatory dimension (by critical reflection). Literature helps disrupt dominant worldviews that limit adult learning to a narrow market-oriented agenda. Complex issues of relevance to lifelong learning and citizenship can be explored through fiction.

Yeung (2020) takes us into the genre of horror, suggesting that reading horror fiction, though possibly disturbing, can also be a transformative experience. Reading Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (1959) readers can challenge preconceived notions of madness and abnormality in the past and explore parallel meanings today. This process leads to ideology critique, a deeper understanding of complex human experiences, and ultimately, freedom from rigid thought patterns. Empathy too can result from such horror fiction! Bishop and Etmanski (2021) take the reader down a rabbit hole, so to speak, in a vivid description of an experiential, theatre-based workshop with an *Alice in Wonderland* theme. Workshops and dramatisations advance the notion of TL as an ongoing, mythic journey of the soul, realising its collective creative potential.

Grenier et al. (2021) argue that book clubs can be a valuable form of social engagement for workers offering a critical and emancipatory learning experience. They can serve as a non-formal alternative to traditional organisational learning practices and help build relationships among work colleagues; foster social care; and bring about change within organisations. Their book clubs function as a form of critical public pedagogy, raising consciousness by linking critical reading and reflection with questionings of power, privilege, and exclusion. They bring transformative and critical pedagogies directly into organisational settings, promoting social and intellectual growth and organisational development. It is a form of critical pedagogy or TL for workers and their organisation.

Summary and implications

Together, these studies demonstrate the power of literature to create immersive, vicarious experiences. Literature, with it is fictional imagined worlds, allows readers to connect with a wide range of characters and situations, prompting critical debates and insights. Literature helps challenge the idea that reality is fixed and reveals the constructed nature of the world and our understanding of it. This can create disorienting dilemmas; the first step in TL. For the TL experience to be complete, however, an emotional and immersive experience must be followed by a period of reflection, and the reconstruction of meanings.

Facilitating TL requires both emotional engagement and a detached, thoughtful process. Discomfort, shock, or what Dewey (1938) called 'unsettling' (p. 35), are

essential for TL. The learner is not restricted to their own personal experiences (or lack of experience of any topic) and emotionally charged fictions can be used effectively as starting points. While the term sociological imagination may not be explicitly used in these reviewed works, it is an unmentioned theme that permeates all of them. Together they highlight the focus of this study by pointing the link that these examples of TL have with an exercise of the sociological imaginations of participants.

This overview highlights several key implications for facilitating TL. Educators must design learning environments that are both supportive and challenging; select creative and potentially transformative materials; and act as guides who support emotional engagements and critical conversations. Teaching for TL must also embody the diverse ways students learn and make meaning. Facilitators must be transformative learners themselves. Imagination and the sociological imagination, though implicated in all the practical examples outlined here, there is not sufficient attention give in the theory of TL to integrating the sociological imagination. I turn to this task now.

What is imagination?

This paper sets out to integrate the concept of sociological imagination in TL. I am suggesting that through literature, one's imagination can emotionally, empathetically and cognitively provide meanings that both inform an understanding of present realities and help envision new alternatives. Without imagination it is not possible to reflect critically on assumptions and frames of reference that underpin present understandings of oneself and society. While teaching I explore with students as part of my lecture format the possibilities offered by literature and the imagination it presupposes. This is undertaken in order to respond to students' various ways of knowing who come from diverse backgrounds such as art, art education, music and music education and spirituality and counselling departments. They join participants who are studying adult education as their major.

Imagination, in contrast to critical reflection, is the forgotten and essential activity that makes TL possible. Greene (1995) asserts that imagination is 'what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those . . . we have called "other"' (p. 3). Likewise, Nussbaum (1997) describes imagination as enabling 'people to understand the inner world of someone different from themselves' (p. 85). It helps us inhabit alternative perspectives, and ask significant questions. Nussbaum provides important insights about the narrative imagination, sustained through literature, as a support for empathy and globally aware citizens. For Mezirow (2009), imagination helps learners to try on unfamiliar roles, explore new perspectives, and envision alternative actions or outcomes. This rehearsing of new way of thinking and making meaning can be facilitated through fiction.

This paper explores the potential of literature to support a particular aspect of imagination – the sociological imagination; reintegrates the sociological imaginations of Mills and Schutz with TL; and progress the development of TL. Though aware of Schutz and Mills, Mezirow did not integrate their work on the sociological imagination with TL. These authors are selected, knowing that the concept of sociological imagination itself is contested in sociology (Palmer, 2022).

The sociological imagination of C. Wright Mills

For C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) the concept of sociological imagination means a study of the historical context of social events with regard to the meaning those events have for the individual's inner life. Sociological imagination connects individual experiences and people's problems with broader structures of society. In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) understands that 'neither the life of the individual – nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (p. 3). This connection is important for TL as the fourth phase in Mezirow's (2000) TL involves making connections between one's individual problems (that Mills calls troubles) and social issues. There is an opportunity here to integrate the sociological imagination of Mills with TL. This addresses previously cited critiques of TL that suggest that TL has an inadequate concept of the social (Fleming, 2016). Social science must include 'both troubles and [social] issues, biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations' (Mills, 1959, p. 226). Literature also explores this terrain.

Mills (1959, p. 195ff) as an enthusiastic teacher of sociology, encouraged students to develop the skills needed to study society, comparing those skills to a kind of 'intellectual craftsmanship'. These skills he wrote, should be combined with a sociological imagination – the required ability to see how personal troubles connect to larger public issues. Mills (1959) believed that sociologists need to keep their imaginations active, in training, or 'spurred' (p. 111) and even suggested that this could be done with what he called a 'playful mind' (a reference to the imagination and its connection with play) but also a great determination or 'fierce drive to make sense of the world' (p. 111). A strong hint here about the importance of our own professional development as teachers of adults.

The sociological imagination of Alfred Schutz

Mezirow (2003) relied on Alfred Schutz (1899–1959) for important insights. Schutz (1970) is a major writer on the concept of *lifeworld. H*e defined it as the preconscious and taken-for-granted presuppositions, and understandings that strongly influence how reality is experienced. The lifeworld includes linguistic and cultural constructs within which reality is interpreted'. From Habermas (1987) we learn that the system subjects the lifeworld to a 'sociopathological form of *internal colonization'* (p. 305). For Mezirow (1991) lifeworld refers to 'the prevailing paradigms or collectively held sociolinguistic meaning perspectives' (p. 161), to uncritically accepted frames of reference and unquestioned assumptions that inform thinking and actions.

Schutz (1967) uses the concept of *typification* to describe how in the process of meaning making, people are categorised (typified) in order to better understand them. Typifications act as form of *recipe knowledge* or handy unquestioned projections onto others as to how we perceive them. Typifying uses imagination to abstract from reality. We make meaning by taking for granted our beliefs in the world; by the 'suspension of doubt' (Schutz, 1967, p. 229). We are always pre-acquainted with the world through socially given meanings as a 'stock of knowledge at hand', that is 'biographically determined' (Schutz, 1967, p. 247). Schutz describes these as a set of 'socially approved set of rules and recipes for dealing with reality' (1967, p. 34) and are the 'sediment of previous experiences' (p. 33). They are open to change in TL.

These Schutz concepts illustrate how TL is embedded in a sociological tradition. How we make meaning is only fully understood when we also understand that our knowledge is impacted by typifications. The sociological imagination allows us take a more critical stance towards our typifications.

Schutz links *bracketing* with the activity of making meaning. We put in brackets 'the doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise than it appears' (Schutz, 1967, p. 46). Bracketing in TL involves holding some 'beliefs in abeyance in order to allow ourselves to access an experience from outside our usual frame of reference' (Mezirow, 1991, p. 149).

Crucially, Schutz (1945) articulates a concept of '*dialectic thinking*' (p. 571); neglected in TL scholarship. Dialectical thinking involves a dynamic relationship between individual actors and social structures; between objective reality and subjective phenomenon. I now assert that personal problems, and disorienting dilemmas, are necessarily and dialectically connected to broader social issues. If this dialectic connection between the personal and the social is ignored, we misunderstand both individual problems and their social contexts and indeed TL itself (Fleming, 2014). For instance, when TL makes connections between one's own individual problems and broader social issues, that connection is dialectical. Again, TL has not integrated these insights and the sociological imagination escapes the attention of much TL scholarship.

The actions one takes as the essential final phase of TL are now identified as dialectically interconnected actions at personal and social levels. This requires that one perceives how internal oppressions and external injustices operate dialectically; that actions supporting social change have a dialectical relationship between personal transformation and social change. The other phases of TL must also be reimagined. This critical reconstruction of TL moves TL towards a critical theory of adult learning.

Oskar Negt: toward a critical theory of sociological imagination

Oscar Negt (1934–2024) was a critical theorist in the Frankfurt School tradition and his first book (1971), was titled *Sociological imagination and exemplary learning*. Much of his work is written in collaboration with a successful film maker Alexander Kluge. Negt asserts that individual experience cannot be properly understood unless it is seen in dialectical relationship with the social environment; without understanding the dialectical relationship both individual experience and social contexts are misconstrued.

Negt (1971) describes his teaching activity as 'exemplary learning' (p. 27) and states that teaching must involve the sociological imagination. He organised instructional materials addressing workers' interests and class consciousness with a view to supporting emancipatory actions. TL has always connected the social and personal, but has not described that they are connected dialectically. It is imperative to discontinue the false misunderstanding of how the social and personal are connected in TL theory and practice. Uniquely, among critical theorists Negt is an adult educator, and together with Kluge, they present teaching materials and instructional methods and provide examples of how fiction (and other art forms including movies) can inform the sociological imagination and a critical adult education; exemplary learning (Kluge & Negt, 2014). This is not an alternative to TL, but an independently arrived at; quite similar; but more critical or dialectical version of TL.

Kluge and Negt (2014) state that neoliberalism subverts our inner resources and compromises imagination by a process they borrowed from Bertolt Brecht and call '*imploitation*' (p. 445). Speaking of workers (as learners) they assert that: 'Since the object of exploitation is put inside them, they are, so to speak, victims of "imploitation" (*Einbeutung*)' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 445). This prevents understanding the real conscious experience of oppression and how systems undermine 'workers' imagination' (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 35). Using a powerful image, they describe imagination as the 'productive force of the brain' (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 37). It is, they continue, reflecting how the arts in society can be in a realm of its own, that imagination is too often seen as part of the world of intangible things like the arts, and is associated with feelings and disconnected, barricaded from the real world of workers: 'barricaded into the ghettos of the arts, dreaming, and the "delicate feelings"' (p. 36). In typically expressive language they (Negt & Kluge, 2016) describe the undermined imagination as the 'vagabond, the unemployed member of the intellectual faculties' (p. 37) to emphasise how out of reach and under-utilised the imagination is in the lives of many. An imploited imagination acts as an obstacle to emancipatory actions. The imagination cannot imagine and so an important tool for the emancipation of workers is lost. Releasing the imagination would become, in their pedagogy (and movie making), a powerful intellectual force for understanding, and for social action; for transformative learning.

If learners are so impacted by the social context in which they work and live, how can students (or in Negt's case workers) retain interest in learning or imagining a different social reality? Negt and Kluge coined the concept of *obstinacy* to describe an extraordinary capacity to not only survive imploitation, but to retain the potential to think, to critique, to change, to transform (Kluge & Negt, 2014). They may have borrowed this obstinacy concept from Marcuse (1968) who believed that life and nature contain active forces that work towards survival and fulfilment stating that: 'Critical theory preserves obstinacy as a genuine quality of philosophical thought' (p. 143). The struggle for recognition, the resilience of learners and the drive for TL are multiple expressions of a deeply engrained posture of obstinacy, of an ability to become wide awake. Being or becoming 'awake' is a concept that Mills (1959, p. 157) and Schutz (1967, p. 212, 1970, p. 72) employed to describe an outcome from exercising the sociological imagination. It is important to be alert to the coalition of ideas coming together to support the understanding of a sociological imagination. This helps ensure that when we attempt in our teaching to link the personal and social we understand both the nature of the connections and are able as practitioners to teach the skills of sociological imagining.

Negt's exemplary learning involves, thinking independently, dialectically, systemically, with sociological imagination, utilising critical reflection. Teaching adults, he engaged in analysing and bringing into awareness historical processes of how learners' interests are often defined for them in society and how power is experienced (Negt, 1973). Negt (1971) emphasises understanding 'workers existence as a social problem' (p. 4) involving learners analysing social situations, in order to understand the causes of these situations and informing actions to change them. Negt goes beyond views of education that emphasise personal growth that may lead to fitting into the social structures of the world (Negt & Kluge, 2016).

Kluge and Negt (2014) published an archive of pedagogical methods for facilitating learning. This adds significantly to the literature already available for this purpose. Using

literature, science fiction, satire, fairy-tales, film, documentaries and a range of innovative materials they support the critical intelligence, curiosity and sociological imaginations of learners.

In contrast to TL's rather tame political interest, Negt's (1971) exemplary learning, when integrated with TL, helps encourage TL towards social and political arenas. Negt provides a framework for historical and material interpretations of subjectivity that are produced by capitalist systems and a source for a new more just and caring society. This learning requires a sociological imagination. All our allies (Mills, Schutz, and Negt) are aware that social change is difficult, involving what Kluge (2017) calls in his book title (quoting Weber), a slow and powerful *Drilling through hard boards*. This is a rare and consequential excursion into adult learning theory and practice by a scholar of the Frankfurt School. However, ever mindful that so much of TL's concepts and philosophy are borrowed from John Dewey, I turn to explore briefly how he thought about the task of this paper – making a case for the transformative power of literature. We now look at literature as art.

John Dewey: the case for exploring art as literature

In *Art as Experience* John Dewey (1979) writes about literature as an art form and as a result we must pay some attention to how he understands the way literature provides an aesthetic experience for the reader. Rather than dedicate a chapter to literature his ideas are referred to occasionally. For Dewey, art provides an experience for the viewer and Dewey uses literature as another example of an art form that provides an experience rather than just an event that happens. Space does not allow an exploration of the important and influential work of John Dewey who casts a positive and supportive shadow over this study. His views on the arts and literature (1979) as providing a launch pad for social change are important as are the ability of literature to provide deeply meaningful, emotionally engaged, vicarious experiences of imagined (but convincingly presented as real) characters and situations that stimulate deep reflection on what it means to live a purposeful, just life. The arts and literature counteract the dangers of a humdrum life where imagination may struggle to survive. For Dewey (1979) the 'humdrum' (p. 40) life and the submission to 'conventional' (p. 40) values are real enemies of art, of literature and of the imagination needed in order to be alive in society.

For both Dewey and Mezirow, TL is grounded in experience. Dewey defines education as the 'reorganization or reconstruction of experience' (Dewey, 1916, p. 76), which increases our ability to direct subsequent experiences. Literature is an active process of perceiving the world, experiencing emotions and reorganising thoughts and understandings that lead to personal growth and social change. Literature, as all art does, allows the writer to convey their experience to the reader and possibly bridge cultural and social divides, foster empathy and shared understandings. Literature, as art means it is an active player in human life, deepening our understanding of and connection to the world, and each other, and in the process bringing about a reconstructing of experience.

Dewey on rupture: the disorienting dilemmas of TL

Disorienting dilemma is a key concept in Mezirow's theory but the roots of this concept in Dewey's work on rupture are unexplored in the TL literature. According to Donald

J. Morse (2018), a Dewey scholar at Fordham University, Dewey has a 'philosophy of rupture' (p. 4). Rupture is akin to the current understanding of a crisis in making meaning. According to Morse, Dewey asserted that settled states are 'undone', and this 'undoing' is the "primary force in the meaning-making process (p. 22). Meaning is achieved through disruptions. Dewey held that discord (rupture) brings a creative force to the pursuit of meaning (Morse, 2018). There is no such thing as a final settlement, a final definitive meaning because every settlement introduces the conditions for a 'new unsettling' (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). Dewey is associated with the continuity of experience and parallel to this continuity he emphasises the experience of rupture. Even when it is explored in TL (Cox & John, 2016; Scully-Russ et al., 2022) there is no reference to its origins in Dewey. TL is achieved through rupture, as in a disorienting dilemma or crisis.

In ordinary daily living, according to Alma (2020) we become aware of an experience in 'problematic' (p. 34) situations that are beyond our implicit understanding – beyond the scope of tacit knowledge. In that moment we may become conscious of a rupture (Alma, 2020, p. 34). Experiences of art (Alma, 2020), and by implication reading literature, confronts us with rupture, as tacit frames of reference lose their balance in the attempt to make meaning of an aesthetic experience. This may prompt a disorienting dilemma. Alma (2020) insightfully asserts that 'all art depends on friction with what we take for granted' and 'breaking through our habitual ways of looking at the world' (p. 39). Such moments I might playfully refer to as the 'transformative friction of fiction!' This echoes Adorno's comment that great art makes 'recipients lose their footing' (Adorno, 2004, p. 244). The idea of rupture or being off-balance may be a better way of framing the much over-used concept of disorienting dilemma in TL.

Transformative teaching through literature

In the current climate there is an imperative to focus on literature. I recall the New York University Bookstore on Broadway. It has a special display in a prominent place advertising what it calls 'Banned Books'. It has more than twenty titles on display; including *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison), *The Color Purple* (Walker), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee), *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck), *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger), *I know why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou), and *The Handmaids Tale* (Atwood). As with all censorship there is an imperative to encourage students to read and tell and study the forbidden stories of our culture.

Reading literature for critical purposes requires close attention to the text, the story, the characters and the context. Honneth (2023) indicated, that art (by implication literature) alerts us to the fine granular nature of human experience, emotions, the texture of human relationships and the multiple perspectives that fuel the narrative. Literature must have the capacity to provide an experience; it requires an engagement with one's own emotional responses and thoughts and an ability to make connections. Literature must provide an opportunity for the reader to connect the fictional narrative with their own. In providing an example of how literature is utilised and how discussions unfold I turn to Shakespeare in whom there has been a renewed interest over the past decade; note the number of times *Othello* or *Julius Caesar* have been performed. Current unease with leadership in the US in particular, has prompted a surge of interest in the

great tragic leaders of Shakespeare plays. Literature can ignite critique in ways that are often less threatening than the real-life situations as it 'allows for a distancing of self from experience' (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015, p. 22). Here I mention a Shakespeare play as a currently used example.

Shakespeare: King Lear

Shakespeare's *King Lear* takes the reader on a dystopian tour of relationships between members of his family and imagines what may become of those who choose power over relationships. Lear commands that each daughter confess their love and loyalty to him in return for inheriting their share of his kingdom. Two daughters, Gonerill and Regan famously lie and cheat in order to convince Lear, and gain influence and political power. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, the king's favourite, cannot lie, is kind, loving and genuinely so. By not playing the game, she is disinherited and excluded not only from political power (land ownership) but also from relationships in the family.

Readers, or theatre goers, might wish to explore the challenges of achieving power and holding it, as well as the interpersonal aspects of holding that power, along with the gendered nature of these issues. Lear does not build his kingdom on foundations of affection and attachments but rather on property, blind loyalty and dishonesty. It could be argued that each daughter inherited a version of his ruthless and toxic male power, though Cordelia chose the opposite rather than a similar version.

As the play ends, Cordelia remains as blameless as at the beginning, but with more feelings for her father. When finally, and tragically, all three daughters lie dead on the stage with their dead father, the king, the audience is left to wonder how to change within such realities. How might one relate today to toxic expressions of power? This question can be posed for individuals in families, in groups; in organisations; at work; in society; and in universities who try to navigate current tensions between freedom and political agendas. In real world situations, where toxic leadership seems to be increasingly immune to change, how can we survive? How can justice, care and fairness flourish? The play helps us confront complex human emotions and social issues, and foster a deeper understanding of the human condition. Authority can be questioned, power exposed, identity explored, social structures examined, as literature so effectively externalises inner chaos. *King Lear* may facilitate the 'reaching beyond' that Greene (1988, p. 12) talks about. Going beyond broken relationships and violated trust, transcending intergenerational conflicts, exploring issues of inflated ego, mental health, vulnerabilities and fragilities of self. The chaos explored in *King Lear* seems to be a common experience today when there appears to be a breakdown in social order and authority; the exercise of irresponsible power; increased inequalities; authoritarianism; and the consequences of failures in ethical leadership.

This is particularly relevant in classrooms today as many students have attended the multiple productions of Shakespeare's plays that, in their conversations and through my own referencing in the lecture element, form a background to the course experience. For instance, Shakespeare's *Othello* has been staged frequently in the United States since Donald Trump took office in January 2017, including a highprofile revival of *Othello* on Broadway's Ethel Barrymore Theatre, in 2025 - Denzel Washington played Othello. The Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. has announced a production of

Othello for 2025–2026. In 2020, the American Shakespeare Centre in Staunton, VA staged *Othello*. A controversial staging of *Julius Caesar* by New York's Shakespeare in the Park portraying Caesar in a manner resembling Donald Trump. It sparked serious political debate and major sponsors Delta Airlines and Bank of America withdrew funding. My class is not on literature and so our engagements with literature are passing, incidental but significant when weekly moments are accumulated over a term.

By presenting, as Freire admits, insights from other critical writers and reviews as synopsised here, conversations take a more critical and transformative turn. This process in my work shadows and follows the process of coding and decoding and the use of generative themes of Paulo Freire. This involved Freire turning to 'specialists' who help with 'transforming reality' (Freire in Torres, 2014, p. 91). The insights of specialists are reflected back to the learners as a way of adding to the 'social, political, cultural and economic themes' of the students (Torres, 2014, p. 91). These specialists include psychologists, education specialists, sociologists and educators (Torres, 2014, p. 141). This rationale for presenting critical insights into my class is a way of not relying entirely on the experience and insights of learners; the example included here follows the process that Freire presents in his writings.

Final thoughts

Literature when utilised using synergetic transformative teaching methods within a variety of learning groups, further possibilities suggest themselves, and as a result of debate and interactions it is possible to strengthen the ability of learners to create and share emancipatory insights and construct meaningful ways of acting. Working in this way requires, it seems, great expertise in teaching.

It just may be, that students know that in their engagements with art, our hearts and minds, feelings and thoughts, our emotional and rational sides are integrated. In a world that seems to value the disconnections; the ones that Dewey and Greene worked against in critiquing false dichotomies. This process is perceived as dangerous. Using literature, especially science fiction, satire, fragments of literature, film and documentaries Kluge and Negt (2014) encourage the dangerous thoughts of critical intelligence, sociological imagination and a dialectical understanding. One book by Kluge (1996) captures this aspect of pedagogy in its title: *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*. As teachers we must start somewhere. Even the teachers of young children can lay the foundations for a critical intelligence, imagination and empathy.

Artists direct our attention to injustices; they offer a bridge between their feelings about the world and our re-awakening. Readers may be forced to see possibilities that are denied by the wrongs of the world and in that experience, we may discover our own 'social imagination' (Dewey, 1938, p. 293). To exercise the imagination in this way, may enable learners to pick up the signals deep within us as individuals and as members of communities who know that a better world is possible (Greene, 1995). Picasso, in an interview with Malraux (1974, p. 110), spoke more forcefully about his painting;

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

Literature can have this impact too.

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