

# Transformative learning as societal learning

Laura Formenti<sup>1</sup> | Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Università Milano Bicocca, Italy

<sup>2</sup>University of Augsburg, Germany

## Correspondence

Laura Formenti, Università Milano Bicocca, Italy.

Email: [laura.formenti@unimib.it](mailto:laura.formenti@unimib.it)

## Abstract

The article synthesizes literature relating to the recent development of the theory of transformative learning (TL) and societal changes using three exemplary fields of study: (1) Civic education and democratic transformations, (2) TL for sustainability and ecology, and (3) TL in the context of migration (and especially for refugees). This article contends that in the literature, TL is considered a promising answer to an urgent search for conceptual and practical tools to address the wicked problems of our time. We see, however, also the potential pitfall of TL if used as a buzzword or understood as a comprehensive reeducation program designed from above that ignores human agency and the emotional, relational, and political challenges of transformation.

## INTRODUCTION

Rooted in humanism and the emancipatory tradition (Freire, 1972; Illich, 1970), and critical theory traditions (Habermas, 1981), Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (TL) is set up by its programmatic commitment to individual growth and social development (Fleming, 2016, 2022). The core assumption is that we can liberate ourselves and "humanize" our worlds by recognizing oppressive, unfair, or unsustainable aspects of the discourses we live by. Critical thinking, a pillar of Mezirow's theory, fuels the capacity to open new possibilities for oneself, the other, and the world. Despite critical voices reproaching Mezirow for ignoring the societal dimension (e.g., Cunningham, 1992), he and other scholars in his theoretical tradition (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Mezirow, 1992) have been clear in considering the social context as relevant for adult learning, and in supporting collective and societal, as well as individual, transformations.

This article offers a map of current research on the societal perspective of transformative learning. What is the role of institutions, organizations, groups, and the whole society, in sustaining or hindering transformation? How do social systems (at a local as well as global level) learn and transform themselves? We want to show how the literature

---

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

of TL has addressed critical and transformative societal learning in increasingly consistent and systematic ways in recent years, integrating organizational learning, group relationships, communities of practice, and the role of relationships, power, and participation, and celebrating the roots of transformative learning in liberating practices.

Transformative learning has become an attractive theory in some emerging fields, where “wicked problems” require a more complex view of education. We want to be especially attentive to the critical exploration of TL theory by different authors. In fact, transformation is a buzzword in too many publications addressing social change, and “transformative” can become meaningless when used as an adjective to tag any shift in human experience (Tisdell, 2012). In a commodified society, transformation easily becomes a good, a promise of happiness, a new consumerist mantra (Formenti & West, 2018).

We believe, the theory and practice of transformative learning offer a good basis for re-conceptualizing the patterns of learning and knowledge production in today's society characterized by an enduring global crisis, in an age of *superdiversity* (Vertovec, 2007) and *supercomplexity* (Barnett, 2000). Uncertainty, unpredictability and the contestability of the known push us to question dominant ideas and patterns of knowledge transmission and to praise the shared construction of knowledge. Adult learning bears multiple dimensions that need to be addressed when speaking about societal transformation. The questions to be posed in this context might be: Who has the power to decide about the direction and the need of transformation? What is the epistemological and ethical base for societal transformation, which includes the questions of who has access, and to which knowledge? Our societies are transforming, but in which direction? Deep changes in the modes of education and learning are moving transformative processes outside the academy and formal education, hence creating new possibilities, as well as risks. We can speak about a trend in the democratization of the process of knowledge creation and about more socially distributed knowledge. On the other side, fundamentalisms, racism, violence, and enduring anti-ecological behaviors are also growing. New reflexive modes of knowledge production are created, questioning routines and commonsense, and calling for responsible acts of innovation and collaborative inquiry.

As we will argue in this article, Mezirow's transformative learning, rooted in critical thinking and anchored in the practice of re-assessing deeply embedded assumptions, seems today especially useful for those researchers and practitioners who are tackling difficult problems, where the dominant or hegemonic frames of reference need to be challenged at a societal level. The required learning involves shifts in self-understanding, the capacity to question normalized actions and positions as individuals and groups, critical awareness of assumptions that are not only personal, but socially shared and reinforced, and knowing how they influence individual and collective perceptions, actions, and possibilities. An epistemological leap is then needed to cultivate a stronger sense of community and context, to develop communities of practice where students, academics, citizens, service users, and many other actors can participate in building their knowledge and identities within a democratic and inclusive social context and getting to know the world in a more relational way.

Education and learning are still conceived by most scholars as individual properties, to be accumulated and used to guarantee success in a very competitive society. The “banking model of education,” criticized by Paulo Freire (1972), reinforces commonsense and oppression, not least by defining a priori who deserves to have a good education and what it is. Institutionalized learning is still separated from everyday experiences and contexts. Contemporary education should reflect the same complexity that researchers and stakeholders are coping with (Tassone et al., 2018) and address societal and environmental challenges.

In this article, we try to answer the questions: What is the contribution of TL to the challenges the world is facing, beyond individual change? What are the trends in global research that show the potential of TL in sustaining larger changes, namely regarding democratization, sustainability, migration, social justice, and community building? In the following, we address three exemplary fields of study in a societal change where TL is explicitly used as a lens of understanding: (1) Civic education and democratic transformations, (2) TL for sustainability and ecology, and (3) TL in the context of migration (and especially for refugees).

## CIVIC EDUCATION, DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATIONS, AND TL

TL has achieved considerable prominence in recent times as a basis for democratic change and societal transformative development. On the one hand, individual transformative growth can lead to societal transformation. In this case, the person contributes to reshaping societies or communities and is a pioneer of change: the research focuses then on how individual experiences can translate from the individual to the collective level (Rose et al., 2017; Singer-Brodowski, 2016). On the other hand, changes in societal structure can happen due to other factors, and individuals need to catch up in their own transformative learning. For instance, the transformations due to the collapse of the Socialist bloc in Eastern and Central Europe demanded a deep personal change from every citizen in those countries. They needed to learn how to live and function in a democratic society (and to build those societies further) which included radical changes in their way of living in their social and political systems, of interacting with one another, and even how they view themselves (Kloubert, 2014, 2019a).

The theoretical lens of TL is used to comprehend and analyze social transformation in different areas. The latest special issue on civic education in the *Journal of Transformative Education* points to some of them: transformative civic engagement practice within higher education, transformative global citizenship education, transformative civic digital learning, and transformative learning within social movements (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022). A common area of study is the context of higher education and extracurricular activities, where theorists and practitioners have explored the fruitful overlap between service learning and transformative learning theory (for example, Bamber, 2016). Even if research in the United States has indicated that perspective transformation is a relatively rare outcome of service-learning courses (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 136), some scholars address the conditions favorable to transformative learning. For instance, Daloz (2000) identifies four conditions under which engagement within service learning can lead to greater social responsibility: the presence of the other, reflective discourse, a mentoring community, and opportunities for committed action. Those conditions might be expanded to other fields where social change is envisioned through transformative learning. Most of all, the demand for supportive relationships and a supportive environment in the process of TL is central when speaking about the societal dimension of TL (Schugurensky, 2002). TL for social change is reliant on a strong community of practice and inclusive contexts, where learning is built in a more relational way.

In his book on transformative learning and visions for the twenty-first century, O'Sullivan (1999) puts emphasis on the need for a new civic culture aimed at an enhanced sense of community and extended involvement in wider communities of participation. Similarly, Finnegan (2022) emphasizes the need for rethinking and creating educational social spaces: *publics* and *counter-publics*. He sees the latter as transformative spaces created from “below.” “Counter-publics are, in this sense, movements of transformative

learning of a particular sort which seek to change political and cultural assumptions” (Finnegan, 2022, p. 26). These reflections in the literature indicate an emerging trend in the discussion of social transformative learning: (civic) learning is not limited to institutional or organized forms but involves direct (civic) action and engagement. The borders between action and learning are blurring. Social movements, environmental campaigns, feminist or diversity movements, and other grassroots social and political actions, are increasingly recognized as venues of transformative learning (Evans et al., 2022; Holst, 2018). Spaces for encounters, agoras, and civic actions have been thus analyzed as educational spaces for the creation and promotion of socially transformative knowledge (Stromquist, 2004).

As a theoretical lens, TL helps to articulate, anticipate, and facilitate the needed changes in different societies/communities while identifying a range of fundamental shifts or *outcomes* occurring when a person learns: for example, knowledge, values and attitudes, skills, practices (Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007) or shifts in worldviews, self-concepts, epistemology, ontology, behavior, or capacity (Hoggan, 2016). TL as a *process* combines critical reflection and dialectical discourse situated in historical and socio-political contexts, but also action in the service of societal transformation. In this understanding, the process of TL distances itself from indoctrination, or the practices of social engineering, when a top-down approach is favored—including the perspective of “seeing like a state” (Scott, 2008). Civic education embraces the theory of TL especially when it dissociates itself from reproduction and civil concord, and moves towards critical competencies and rational disagreement, challenging the colonial and nationalist order (White et al., in press). TL aiming at social transformation is thus at odds with such problematic practices as manipulation and propaganda, and emphasizes the value of democratic criticality, dissent, and reflected discourse (Sibbett, 2016). The awareness of the potential misuse of learning for social change (or civic learning in general) caused a broad academic discussion resulting in a sort of didactical Charter, the so-called Beutelsbach consensus. (Wehling, 1977). This is a policy and consensus paper that emerged after lengthy discussions between educators and politicians concerned with the goals of civic education in the 1970s. The consensus—named after the 1976 meeting venue—itself consists of three principles: (1) The prohibition against overwhelming and indoctrination (teachers should not force their opinions on students, but enable them to form their own opinions); (2) Treating controversial topics as controversial; and (3) Giving weight to the personal interests of students. This Charter reminds us that the development of a worldview should be based on critical self-reflection and discourse, and not be determined by others, but by the learners themselves (Kloubert, 2018).

On that account, the question arises whether we understand transformative education to be the most effective possible program for changing the attitude and behavior of learners, or an invitation to people to reflect and critically review previous orientations and behaviors. Accordingly, Hoggan-Kloubert and Hoggan (2022) make an explicit distinction between a *process-oriented approach* to TL (for example, that provides knowledge, skills, and other tools that enable a learner to transform in their own way over time); an *adaptive approach* (that recognizes that learners are enmeshed in a current process of transformation and supports them accordingly), while dissociating itself from a *prescriptive approach* (efforts designed to transform others): “Particular transformations cannot be prescribed from any group of people towards another; they should emerge from societal dialogue rather than being pre-determined” (Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2022, p. 124). TL in this sense means a substantial change without a predetermined direction by teachers. Education should not be understood as an instrument to implement a transformation agenda. It does, however, enable a comprehensive (ideology-critical) process of reflection on the relationships learners have with their environment and their own development toward active

citizenship (Sterling, 2001). However, transformative education cannot replace political action (Seitz, 2018) and be considered as a magic bullet of societal improvement; it is an important and indispensable part alongside other mechanisms such as political decisions, economic development, and so forth.

The connection between TL and democracy development is another important thread in the literature. Inherent in the very idea of democracy is the notion that citizens are not passive spectators whose socio-political lives are unalterable. Quite the contrary, an individual is seen as a co-shaper and potentially a transformation agent, acting in a self-determined and comprehensive way in influencing their situation. Individuals can acquire the necessary skills via processes of learning. Most theorists in the field agree that democratic discourse is especially central to TL (Dirkx, 1998; Illeris, 2014; Mezirow, 1992; Schugurensky, 2002). Schugurensky (2002) speaks about reciprocity between TL and participatory democracy; not only does TL nurture the necessary subjective conditions for genuine participation, but participatory democracy nurtures TL. “In other words, TL can improve the quality of citizens’ participation in democratic institutions, and at the same time democratic participation itself creates powerful opportunities for self-transformation” (Schugurensky, 2002, pp. 66–67).

That TL has been used to analyze times of upheaval and crisis is not surprising, as it offers a theory and a means to rethink deeply embedded assumptions and to learn how to make the world fit for the future. It answers to the need for fundamental social change (Kloubert, 2014). Some research, however, warns against potential radicalization as an unwanted or unexpected outcome of TL. Wilner and Dubouloz (2010) shed light on the processes involved in Islamic violent radicalization and use the phases and terminology of TL to describe how individuals learn and adopt novel political, social, ideological, and/or religious ideals that justify and legitimize indiscriminate violence. Critical life events may lead to a reassessment of one’s own social position, future ambitions, and personal relationships on the basis of newly acquired knowledge. This phase of reorientation is susceptible to radicalization processes (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010). Rapid globalization and atomization of society can lead to an increased demand for group identity or social identity in democracies, which can become a motivational trigger for radicalization and lead to the subcultural genesis of extremist ideologies, which provide justification, direction, and impetus for politically violent action (West, 2016).

TL is also used beyond single communities or societies to describe global development processes on a larger scale. The term “Great Transformation” (introduced by Karl Polanyi in 1944) has been circulating in the social and educational sciences for some time. Polanyi’s “Great Transformation” (1944) describes the emergence of the liberal market economy in the 19th century in England. The author traces the transformation of economic mentalities in the course of industrialization—away from reciprocity and redistribution based on personal and group relationships toward establishing formal institutions aimed at promoting a self-regulating market economy. This process was accompanied by industrial progress but also with growing social inequality. In the market economy system, the structures and rules of the economy become independent of the structures and rules of social cohesion. This transformation led to the emergence of a competitive capitalist economy, which for Polanyi is unsustainable because of its destructive influence on human relationship and human nature. Polanyi calls for the reintegration of the market into a free and self-determined society, arguing and reflecting on the impacts of a “Great Transformation” from the perspective of the socialist and humanistic worldview.

Modern concepts of global learning call for a paradigm shift away from a nation-state-centered understanding of education, which is no longer able to meet the requirements of an interconnected and interdependent world-society. In Germany, the idea of “Great

Transformation” explicitly refers to TL theory, as discussed in the 2011 report “Social Contract for a Great Transformation” by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen [WBGU], 2011). Transformative learning is discussed in the report in the sense of perspective transformation that generates goals, values, and visions leading the actions of individuals in the desired direction (toward sustainable development of the planet). Researchers differ in the way that social transformation is perceived: transformation as fundamental, system-wide change or as gradual change in certain areas (Seitz, 2018). However, if education is supposed to ensure a certain pre-determined development, in this case sustainable development, then it is always suspected of being used as an instrument (Nohl, 2022). To avoid the danger of instrumentalization, Nohl (as well as other authors) calls for focusing on the emancipatory and critical potential of TL.

A debate was ignited in the German-speaking research community as to whether research should actively help to shape transformation. This discussion was mainly carried out in the journal “GAIA—Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society” (for example, Bösch, 2014) and by the then President of the German Research Foundation (Strohschneider, 2014). Strohschneider (2014) criticizes “transformative research” (that is, research aiming at promoting societal transformation) for shifting the focus away from basic research aiming foremost at analyzing and understanding scientific questions toward predominantly problem-solving research aiming (merely) at application (p.180). Here is obviously not the place to solve the ancient debate whether scientists should focus on basic or applied research, on generalizable or particular knowledge. But the tension that arises here needs to be considered: TL as a lens for societal development could risk blurring the boundaries between activism and research; transformative learning as a tool for change might overshadow the debate about the phenomenon as such in all its implications. The German discussion emphasizes, though, the fact that TL is prone to raise political debate alongside academic ones.

Using TL in the context of civic education and democratic transformation reveals some fruitful implications for societal learning: it is relational in its nature and needs a strong sense of community and support; it is connected to the life-worlds of learners and needs spaces to develop beyond established institutions (for example, public spaces and counter-publics); it is incompatible with the practice of imposition and instrumentalization; and, finally, in a complex and superdiverse world, it needs to address (implicitly or explicitly) the global impacts.

## TL FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND ECOLOGY

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is defined by UNESCO as “holistic and *transformational* education that addresses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment” (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017, p. 7). The societal dimension of TL is relevant for today’s ecological crisis, as there is a need to promote sustainable behaviors and practices, which in turn are circularly connected to deep changes at a social, cultural, and structural level. It is not only a matter of changing individual perspectives, but a struggle involving organizations, societies, and the planet itself. The needed learning is not cumulative, instrumental, or transmissive, but transformative, that is, aimed at breaking dominant routines and frameworks of meaning. TL, then, offers valuable insights about the development of strategies and competences related to sustainability and ecology, to inform the design and implementation of projects, reorienting pedagogical practices from the conventional ones to more coherent and effective.

Reflection on assumptions, values, and worldviews (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; Wals & Schwarzin, 2012) includes how they are socially learned and reinforced; it reveals powers and injustice behind the ecological crisis and patterns of knowledge production that keep things as they are. TL is a tool to question what is taken for granted, normalized, and hegemonic, thus enabling individuals and communities to make changes. Therefore, it is increasingly used in ESD studies, even if mostly superficially and instrumentally (Boström et al., 2018; Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020). For example, many publications only refer to Mezirow and forget about more specific contributions on this topic that go beyond the original formulation of TL and expand its boundaries (O'Sullivan et al., 2002; O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004) or revise its ontology and epistemology (Lange, 2015, 2018).

Some limits in using TL in this area of studies are due, in fact, to basic assumptions (Boström et al., 2018), such as:

1. The dominant focus on the individual, even when the context of inquiry is an organization or society; change is expected to come from individuals and cognitive skills, and no explicit theory of collective learning is offered.
2. TL links “separated knowledge worlds” and celebrates diversity, inclusivity, and participation; however, the narrative of “separate knowledge worlds,” structural to many organizations, is itself a limit to cross-fertilization.
3. TL recognizes the world's complexity and dynamic interconnectedness; systems learn by feedback, adapting to new circumstances such as climate change. A community can express its own resilience. But adaptation is not neutral. “How can we ensure that this ‘new’ society is not, for example, an eco-authoritarian society? [...] what are the possibilities for promoting transformative changes today to avoid an unwanted society tomorrow?” (p. 5).
4. TL fosters dialogue and critical discussions, but most institutions and groups are not open to exploration, error, or transgression; accountability and control are dominant in the contemporary world.
5. TL brings positive outcomes for the individual, group, organization and “not only for the planet's sake” (p. 5). However, knowledge is unequally distributed and used to promote certain interests and values at detriment of others.

These individualistic, cognitive, optimistic, and harmonious assumptions risk being collusive with Western thought, colonialism, patriarchy, and neoliberal values. As stated by Lange (2015), TL is rooted in the modernist paradigm, while embracing a relational, organic, and theoretically plural perspective would respond better to the ecological challenges. A critical approach should then integrate TL with ideas that bring a deeper understanding of how dominant ontologies and structures reinforce unsustainable rules, norms, habits, and practices (Boström et al., 2018). Although dialogic interaction (Formenti & West, 2018, 2021; Wals & Schwarzin, 2012) is a must for transformative pedagogies, dialogue can be frustrating and counterproductive when strong interests prevail. Who decides which and whose perspectives are relevant? The normative dimension of the sustainability agenda fuels resistance to learning, denialism, social tensions, and conflicts, but in literature, with few exceptions, “inertia, conflicts, anxiety, anti-reflexivity, and power remain largely undiscussed and untheorized” (Boström et al., 2018, p. 5). So, TL could be usefully integrated with other theories that better illuminate institutional structures, social practices, and conflict, such as reflexive social learning, capability theory (Kronlid & Lotz-Sisitka, 2014; Wals & Schwarzin, 2012), critical phenomenology, socio-cultural and cultural activity theory, new social movements, postcolonial theory, etc.

Studies on ESD in higher education use TL to challenge dominant pedagogies (Tassone et al., 2018) and suggest interdisciplinarity, hands-on experience, and relational pedagogies

as means to provoke expected and unexpected dilemmas. However, a good enough space, that is a relational space where each participant can feel safe to express themselves and explore the unknown, is needed to cope with the struggles induced by the normative orientation, emotional charge, and power issues embedded in sustainability discourses. Some scholars identify strong contradictions, such as Eguavoen and Tambo (2020), who reflect on a Master Program in The Gambia, where strong powers and dependence from foreign money make TL impossible. In their systematic review, Rodríguez Aboytes and Barth (2020) discuss relevant features of the learning process, outcomes, and conditions for TL. In the learning process, they show the relevance of *discourse*, as a process of sharing knowledge and practices, entailing conflict and problem resolution; even when it comes to *action engagement* there is a need for relational and social conditions beyond the individual, for example, the implementation of participatory decision-making and critical awareness in the community body.

Learning outcomes are manifold: the shared construction of new knowledge, practical skills and understanding; a sense of unity and interconnectedness; changes in worldview and identity; a sense of agency and empowerment; critical systemic and complex thinking; and social learning—defined by the authors as the reinforcement of social relationships within and among groups and organizations, political action, mobilization, and activism. Shifting from “sustainability” to “ecology” as a keyword in literature seems to invite an ontological and epistemological transformation of TL (Lange, 2015, 2018), entailing a deeper recognition of the interconnectedness among humans and with the environment and the living, as well as objects, materials, and landscapes. How can a more responsible and responsive attitude toward the environment be learned? Formenti and West (2021) invoke an ecosystemic epistemology characterized by complexity, ambivalence, and uncertainty, a re-definition of the world as made of ongoing interactions among the living and non-living, the external and the internal.

*Civic ecology* (Krasny, 2018) is an invitation to engage people in their natural and social environment, giving space for diversity in cultural change. In this framework, Chaves and Wals (2018) apply the principles of transformative pedagogy (that is, a good story, co-leadership, uncertainty, passions, and plurality) in projects where people interact, share narratives, and imagine possibilities. *Reflexivity*, rather than mere reflection, is sought, as a process “transforming and transgressing stubbornly resistant patterns and systems based on undesirable foundations and values” (Chaves & Wals, 2018, p. 106). The authors describe a program in Bogotá where self-organized intercultural spaces aimed to foster ecological practices became transformative and allowed participants to re-negotiate control, using deep reflexivity and practicing TL principles coherently.

Another emerging concept is *food sovereignty* (Pimbert, 2018), when food producers and consumers learn to claim their right to define policies and practices of agroecological development. Agroecological social movements build food sovereignty using global networking and the traditions of popular education to construct a critical repertoire of actions (Anderson, et al., 2019). Their interpretation of TL features social networking, horizontal relationships, dialogues of different forms of knowledge and wisdom, and connections to practical and political knowledge.

To challenge dominant narratives and the capitalist/consumerist paradigm, Kaufmann et al. (2019) propose a *degrowth perspective* in educational practices, social movements, and academic discussions: “the unquestionable desirability of growth in the common sense [...] needs to be confronted if a discussion for a different future is to open up” (p. 932). They combine TL with a critical-emancipatory understanding of education and offer a *pedagogy of degrowth* based on creating spaces for critical reflection on the political dimensions in educational settings.



Tassone et al. (2018) discuss ecological responsibility as rooted in *phronesis*, the Greek word for practical wisdom, that is, what should be done in certain circumstances with an ethical, moral, and political sensitivity. The hegemonic accountability model reduces human action to playing by the rules of an established game. Hence, we may be aware of the impact of our actions on the immediate surroundings, but not of larger or future impact (Owen et al., 2013). The ecological crisis has shown that responsibility is not an individual affair but a collective process entailing complexity and limited knowledge. A contemporary idea of responsibility includes care, responsiveness, curiosity. A pedagogy of responsibility in higher education weaves knowledge (epistemology), action (praxis), and becoming (ontology). It is a combination of real-world situations, interactions, critical dialogue among diverse perspectives, and questioning commonsense and naturalization. Its core is the creation of emancipatory spaces for transdisciplinary learning and shared knowledge.

Developing this line of thought further, Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) propose transgressive learning, based on epistemic decolonization (Gordon, 2020) and disrupting pedagogies by which students and staff learn to deal with complexity and uncertainty, bringing multiple voices and actors into the scene, building science more congruently with real life, and challenging visible and internalized powers. Here again, cognitive and collective transformations need to be linked, and theoretical pluralism can be a solution to some limits of TL.

To sum up, the potential of TL in designing, implementing, and assessing learning paths for ecology and sustainability is very strong. Conversely, this area of study brings a valuable contribution to the expansion and transformation of TL in new directions, more connected to the social and natural context, respectful of complexity and favorable to cooperative transformation in the community (Formenti, 2018).

There is a need to overcome the superficial use of TL as a *buzzword* (Rodríguez Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020) or a mere alternative to the transmissive approach, and to interrogate its modernist roots (Lange, 2015). Most literature praises collective, open-ended, reflexive, and action-oriented TL processes (Fazey et al., 2018), apt to challenge hegemonic knowledge and practices, involving a range of actors with multiple perspectives, and combining diverse forms of knowledge. In order to sustain them, increased theoretical depth, epistemic interrogation, and a pluralistic approach, also integrating theories of institutional structures, social practices, and conflict (Boström et al., 2018) are highly desirable.

## TL IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

TL is also a popular lens to look at the conditions, processes, and impacts of migration. Migration certainly induces or even compels people to learn, to develop new skills and practices, to understand the cultural context of knowledge, and to develop new meanings. It involves also learning how to function within—and even to have an impact on—one's new social context (Kloubert, 2018). It can be learning to build new social capitals and navigate in new communities (Alfred, 2015; Webb, 2017). Consequently, TL has been used to describe personal experiences of migrants. Furthermore, in some contexts it activated the general discussion about transformations of the society in the face of migration. The latter was used to reflect on “Adult Education in a Migration Society” (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). For the various authors included in the book, representing 13 countries, the learning process is multi-directional; individual transformations take place under the influence of the (new) environment, but also the environment (migration society) transforms under the influence of migratory movements. Learning in a migration society is

transformational in its nature but needs appropriate societal contexts: venues for dialogue and spaces of encounter and recognition of diversity, where individual and collective life-trajectories and worldviews can be shared and valued. Supportive structures and groups are therefore decisive for transformative learning in a migration society (Jōgi & Ūmarik, 2022; Schugurensky, 2002). Consequently, learning in a migration society embraces not only transformative needs of migrants undergoing the process of new orientation and integration, but aims also at developing a vision of a new inclusive social model, grounded in diversity, multiple belongings, and recognition. Formenti and Luraschi (2020, 2022) combine TL with an ecosystemic imagination to investigate coexistence and embodied dialogue as a concrete, relational process occurring in a material and symbolic space and producing new unexpected modes of living together. They develop an innovative methodological approach facilitating the research and practice of fostering TL in migration societies: the sensobiographic walk, an educational and social intervention designed to foster understanding and inclusion between new migrants and members of the local community.

Alongside migration studies, transformative learning theory also enriches the framework of diversity education that goes beyond informational learning and addresses issues of inclusion and exclusion, power structures, and social justice in heterogeneous societies. Banks' (2020) book entitled "Diversity, Transformative Knowledge, and Civic Education" establishes a definition of transformative civic education (without, unfortunately, referring to any authors of TL). Banks' transformative civic education consists of several aspects:

- It recognizes and validates the cultural identities of students.
- "It also enables them to acquire the information, skills, and values needed to challenge inequality within their communities, their nations, and the world, to develop cosmopolitan values and perspectives, and to take actions to create just and democratic multicultural communities and societies [...]."
- It also fosters critical thinking skills and political literacy [...], knowledge, and skills that are urgently needed because populist revolts in a number of Western nations are resulting in the election of conservative, xenophobic, and authoritarian politicians who seriously threaten democracy, which is fragile and requires continuous renewal." (p. 153)

TL is a useful lens to reflect on social transformation due to the process of (global) migration and flight. As examples, Margaroni and Magos (2018) investigate the transformation of frames of references of Afghan asylum seekers in Greece, concluding that the new mental habits have potential for bigger societal transformation, as they lead ultimately to "adoption of human rights as a prerequisite sine qua non, for the restoration of respect for human existence" (p. 205). In contrast to traditional perspectives (such as those critiqued by for example, Shan & Fejes, 2015) in which migrants are seen as either a shapeable and transformable crowd that needs to be integrated (mostly through assimilation) rather than as individuals with personhood and aspirations, some scholars argue that educational policies and practices surrounding migration should focus migrants' agency and fully embrace the notion human dignity of each person (Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2022). TL in the context of migration goes further and demands that we apply human dignity as an ethical frame for societal development.

## CONCLUSION

This article explores the expansion of focus from individual transformation to the social dimension in the literature on TL. By embracing the societal dimension, TL suggests tools

to cope with an ever-changing world and its *wicked problems*—recognizing individuals as co-creators of their world(s), focusing on social action, democratization, and societal improvement. Driven by the inspiration to make our society and our world better (in local as well as global contexts) transformative education aspires, not to inculcate visions of utopias, but rather to acknowledge human dignity and human agency. The unspoken danger is that in the end, transformative education could be understood as a comprehensive reeducation program whose goal is to change people's worldview and behavior. Transformative learning aiming at societal improvement starts with fostering individual capacity to responsibly co-shape society and imagine alternatives where necessary. Learners are then perceived not as transformable fabric, but as agents of democratic and emancipatory development.

As mentioned above, we see TL as a compelling theoretical and practical tool to contribute to a new epistemic and social turn through challenging dominant structures and knowledge networks. This includes implementing transdisciplinary and trans-cultural dialogue, shared decision-making processes and good enough relational spaces. Not everything is on the shoulders of individuals, or in their power. In this framework, the growing interest for TL in literature at a global scale can be seen as the answer to an urgent search for conceptual and practical tools of societal transformation. However, there is a risk that TL becomes a new buzzword, a dominant unquestioned theory, referred to but lacking deep understanding. Another menace is connected to the anglophone dominance and anglophone colonization of research around TL. We see an urgent need of academic perusal of research around (social) transformation developed in the non-anglophone countries and published in other languages than English. We argued in this article for both the appropriateness of TL for learning for social change and for raising awareness of potential pitfalls of doing this in an uncritical way.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Open Access Funding provided by Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

## REFERENCES

- Alfred, M. V. (2015). Diaspora, migration, and globalization: Expanding the discourse of adult education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2015(146), 87–97.
- Anderson, C. R., Maughan, C., & Pimbert, M. P. (2019). Transformative agroecology learning in Europe: building consciousness, skills and collective capacity for food sovereignty. *Agriculture and Human Values: Journal of the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society*, 36(3), 531–547.
- Banks, J. (2020). *Diversity, transformative knowledge, and civic education: Selected essays*. Routledge.
- Bamber, P. (2016). *Transformative education through international service-learning: Realising an ethical ecology of learning*. Routledge.
- Barnett, R. (2000). *Realizing the university in an age of supercomplexity*. Open University Press.
- Bösch, S. (2014). Wissenschaft der Transformation – Transformationen der Wissenschaft. *GAI A - Ökologische Perspektiven für Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft*, 23(3), 278–279.
- Boström, M., Andersson, E., Berg, M., Gustafsson, K., Gustavsson, E., Hysing, E., Lidskog, R., Löfmarck, E., Ojala, M., Olsson, J., Singleton, B. E., Svenberg, S., Uggla, Y., & Öhman, J. (2018). Conditions for transformative learning for sustainable development: A theoretical review and approach. *Sustainability*, 10(12), 4479.
- Chaves, M., & Wals, A. E. J. (2018). The nature of transformative learning for social-ecological sustainability. In M. E. Krasny (Ed.), *Grassroots to global: Broader impacts of civic ecology* (pp. 105–123). Cornell University Press.
- Cranton, P., & Taylor, E. W. (2012). Transformative learning theory. In E. W. Taylor, & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 21–36). John Wiley & Sons.
- Cunningham, P. (1992). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Daloz, L. A. P. (2000). Transformative learning for the common good. In J. Mezirow (Ed.), *Learning and transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 103–123). Jossey-Bass.
- Dirkx, J. M. (1998). Transformative learning theory in the practice of adult education: An overview. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 7, 1–14.

- Eguavoen, I., & Tambo, E. (2020). Transformative learning for global change? Reflections on the WASCAL Master Programme in Climate Change and Education in the Gambia. In I. Haltermann & J. Tischler (Eds.), *Environmental change and African societies* (pp. 199–224). Brill.
- Fazey, I., Schöpke, N., Caniglia, G., Patterson, J., Hultman, J., van Mierlo, B., Säwe, F., Wiek, A., Wittmayer, J., Aldunce, P., Al Waer, H., Battacharya, N., Bradbury, H., Carmen, E., Colvin, J., Cvitanovic, C., D'Souza, M., Gopel, M., Goldstein, B., ... Wyborn, C. (2018). Ten essentials for action-oriented and second order energy transitions, transformations and climate change research. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 40, 54–70.
- Evans, R., Kurantowicz, E., & Lucio-Villegas, E. (Eds.). (2022). *Remaking communities and adult learning*. Brill.
- Eyler, J., & Giles Jr, D. E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series. Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Finnegan, F. (2022). Migration and transformative adult education: Reflections on complexity, criticality, and counter-publics in the age of superdiversity. In C. Hoggan, & T. Hoggan-Kloubert (Eds.), *Adult learning in a migration society* (pp. 17–30). Routledge.
- Fleming, T. (2016). Reclaiming the emancipatory potential of adult education: Honneth's critical theory and the struggle for recognition. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 7(1), 13–24.
- Fleming, T. (2022). Transformative learning and critical theory: Making connections with Habermas, Honneth, and Negt. In A. Nicolaidis, S. Eschenbacher, P. T. Buergelt, Y. Gilpin-Jackson, M. Welch, & M. Misawa (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of learning for transformation* (pp. 25–43). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Formenti, L. (2018). Complexity, adult biographies and co-operative transformation. In: M. Milana, S. Webb, J. Holford, R. Waller, & P. Jarvis (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook on adult and lifelong education and learning* (pp. 191–209). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Formenti, L., & Luraschi, S. (2020). Migration, culture contact and the complexity of coexistence: A systemic imagination. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 11(3), 349–365.
- Formenti, L., & Luraschi, S. (2022). Building the 'here' and 'there' in different sensescapes. Embodied dialogues among refugees and natives. In C. Hoggan, & T. Hoggan-Kloubert (Eds.), *Adult learning in a migration society* (pp. 133–147). Routledge.
- Formenti, L., & West, L. (2018). *Transforming perspectives in lifelong learning and adult education. A dialogue*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Formenti, L., & West, L. (2021). When Lake Erie is polluted, we are too. In A. Bainbridge, L. Formenti & L. West (Eds.), *Discourses, dialogue and diversity in biographical research* (pp. 23–38). Brill/Sense.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.
- Gordon, L. R. (2020). *Fanon and the crisis of European man: An essay on philosophy and the human sciences*. Routledge.
- Jögi, L., & Ümarik, M. (2022). Seeking hope, safety and new perspectives: Learning and adapting for adult migrants. In C. Hoggan & T. Hoggan-Kloubert (Eds.), *Adult learning in a migration society* (pp. 90–103). Routledge.
- Habermas, J. (1981). *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (vol. 2). Suhrkamp.
- Hoggan, C. (2016). Transformative learning as a metatheory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 66(1), 57–75.
- Hoggan, C., & Hoggan-Kloubert, T. (2022). Embracing transformation: Migration and human dignity. In C. Hoggan, & T. Hoggan-Kloubert (Eds.), *Adult learning in a migration society*. (pp. 119–132). Routledge.
- Hoggan-Kloubert, T., & Hoggan, C. (Eds.). (2022) *Adult learning in a migration society*. Routledge.
- Hoggan-Kloubert, T., & Mabrey, P. (Eds.). (2022). Special issue on "civic education." *Journal of Transformative Education*, 20(3), 167–175.
- Holst, J. D. (2018). From radical adult education to social movement learning. In M. Milana, S. Webb, J. Holford, R. Waller, & P. Jarvis (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook on adult and lifelong education and learning* (pp. 75–92). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Illeris, K. (2014). *Transformative learning and identity*. Routledge.
- Illich, I. (1970). *Deschooling society*. Marion Boyars.
- Kaufmann, N., Sanders, C., & Wortmann, J. (2019). Building new foundations: The future of education from a degrowth perspective. *Sustainability Science*, 14(4), 931–941.
- Kloubert, T. (2014). *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit als Dimension der erwachsenenbildung. Polnische, russländische und ukrainische Perspektiven*. Peter Lang.
- Kloubert, T. (2018). Bathroom access for all: How to educate without indoctrinating. In M. Levinson & J. Fay (Eds.), *Democratic discord in schools: Cases and commentaries in educational ethics* (pp. 199–203). Harvard Education Press.
- Kloubert, T. (2019). Promoting perspective transformation in post-totalitarian societies. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 18(1), 8–23.
- Krasny, M. E. (Ed.). (2018). *Grassroots to global: broader impacts of civic ecology*. Cornell University Press.
- Kronlid, D. O., & Lotz-Sisitka, H. (2014). Transformative learning and individual adaptation. In D. O. Kronlid (Ed.), *Climate change adaptation and human capabilities. Justice and ethics in research and policy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Lange, E. A. (2015). The ecology of transformative learning: Transdisciplinary provocations. *Journal of Transformative Learning*, 3(1), 28–34.
- Lange, E. A. (2018). Transforming transformative education through ontologies of relationality. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 16(4), 280–301.
- Lerner, J., & Schugurensky, D. (2007). Who learns what in participatory democracy? Participatory budgeting in Rosario, Argentina. In R. van der Veen, D. Wildemeersch, J. Youngblood, & V. Marsick (Eds.), *Democratic practices as learning opportunities* (pp. 85–100). Sense Publishers.
- Lotz-Sisitka, H., Wals, A. E. J., Kronlid, D., & McGarry, D. (2015). Transformative, transgressive social learning: Rethinking higher education pedagogy in times of systemic global dysfunction. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 16, 73–80.
- Margaroni, M., & Magos, K. (2018). Refugee experience and transformative learning. *Global Education Review*, 5(4), 194–210.
- Mezirow, J. (1992). Transformation theory: Critique and confusion. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42(4), 250–252.
- Nohl, A.-M. (2022, September 6). *Zwischen Bildung, Gemeinwohl- und politischer Erziehung: Pädagogische Prozesse in Zeiten des Umbruchs* [Paper presentation]. Ökologische, gesellschaftliche und individuelle Umbrüche und ihre Bedeutung für Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung.
- O'Sullivan, E. (1999). *Transformative learning: Educational vision for the 21st century*. University of Toronto Press.
- O'Sullivan, E., Morrell, A., & O'Connor, M. A. (2002). *Expanding the boundaries of transformative learning*. Palgrave.
- O'Sullivan, E., & Taylor, M. (2004). *Learning toward an ecological consciousness: Selected transformative practices*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Owen, R., Stilgoe, J., Macnaghten, P., Gorman, M., Fisher, E., & Guston, D. (2013). A framework of responsible innovation. In R. Owen, J. Bessant, & M. Heintz (Eds.), *Responsible innovation: Managing the responsible emergence of science and innovation in society* (pp. 27–50). Wiley.
- Pimbert, M. P. (2018). *Food sovereignty, agroecology and biocultural diversity. Constructing and contesting knowledge*. Routledge.
- Polanyi, K. (1944). *Origins of our time: The great transformation*. Victor Gollancz.
- Rodríguez Aboytes, J. G., & Barth, M. (2020). Transformative learning in the field of sustainability: A systematic literature review (1999–2019). *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 21(5), 993–1013.
- Rose, M., Schleicher, K., & Maibaum, K. (2017). Transforming well-being in Wuppertal - conditions and constraints. *Sustainability*, 9(12), 2375–2402.
- Schugurensky, D. (2002). Transformative learning and transformative politics. In E. V. O'Sullivan, A. Morrell, & M. A. O'Connor (Eds.), *Expanding the boundaries of transformative learning* (pp. 59–76). Palgrave.
- Scott, J. C. (2008). *Seeing like a State*. Yale University Press.
- Shan, H., & Fejes, A. (2015). Skill regime in the context of globalization and migration (editorial). *Journal of Continuous Studies*, 37(3), 227–235.
- Seitz, K. (2018). *Globales Lernen als Transformative Bildung für eine zukunftsfähige Entwicklung*. In VENRO (Ed.): *Globales Lernen: Wie transformativ ist es? Impulse, Reflexionen, Beispiel*. Diskussionspapier. Berlin (pp. 7–11). Berlin.
- Sibbett, L. A. (2016). Toward a transformative criticality for democratic citizenship education. *Democracy and Education*, 24(2), 1.
- Singer-Brodowski, M. (2016). Transformatives Lernen als neue Theorie-Perspektive in der BNE. In Umwelt-dachverband GmbH (Ed.), *Jahrbuch Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung – Im Wandel*. (pp. 130–139). Forum Umweltbildung im Umweltdachverband.
- Sterling, S. (2001). *Sustainable education: Re-visioning learning and change*. Schumacher Society.
- Strohschneider, P. (2014). Zur Politik der Transformativen Wissenschaft. In A. Brodocz, D. Herrmann, R. Schmidt, D. Schulz, & J. Schulze Wessel (Eds.), *Die Verfassung des Politischen* (pp. 175–192). Springer Fachmedien.
- Stromquist, N. P. (2004). Inequality as a way of life: Education and social class in Latin America. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 12(1), 95–119.
- Tassone, V. C., O'Mahony, C., McKenna, E., Eppink, H. J., & Wals, E. J. (2018). (Re-)designing higher education curricula in times of systemic dysfunction: a responsible research and innovation perspective. *Higher Education*, 76(2), 337–352.
- Tisdell, E. J. (2012). Themes and variations of transformational learning: interdisciplinary perspectives on forms that transform. In E. W. Taylor, & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 21–36). John Wiley and Sons.
- UNESCO (2017). *Education for sustainable development goals. Learning objectives*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6), 1024–1054.
- Wals, A. E. J., & Schwarzin, L. (2012). Fostering organizational sustainability through dialogical interaction. *The Learning Organisation*, 19, 11–27.

- Webb, S. (2017). Learning to manage the self and the hidden injuries of migration. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 49(2), 157–176.
- Wehling, H. G. (1977). Beutelsbacher Konsens. In S. Schiele & K. G. Fischer (Eds.). *Das Konsensproblem in der politischen Bildung* (pp. 179–180). Klett.
- West, L. (2016). *Distress in the city: Racism, fundamentalism and a democratic education*. Trentham Books/UCL Press.
- Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen [WBGU]. (2011): *Welt im Wandel: Gesellschaftsvertrag für eine Große Transformation*. WBGU.
- White, R., Brown, T., Martin, J., & Pevitz, A. (in press). Contextualization of transformative civic education: A critical race perspective. In T. Hoggan-Kloubert, P. Mabrey, & C. Hoggan (Eds.), *Transformative civic education in democratic societies*. Michigan State University Press.
- Wilner, A. S., & Dubouloz, C. (2010). Homegrown terrorism and transformative learning: An interdisciplinary approach to understanding radicalization. *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 22(1), 33–51.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Laura Formenti** is a Professor of General and Social Pedagogy at Milano Bicocca University, Italy, and Chair of the Italian Universities' Network for Lifelong Learning. Her interests include participatory research, using complexity theories and a systemic operative epistemology in adult education and learning.

**Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert** is an Akademische Rätin (associate professor) in the Chair of Adult Education at the University of Augsburg, Germany. After having studied in Ukraine and Germany, she researches migration and civic education (and indoctrination) in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the United States.

**How to cite this article:** Formenti, L., & Hoggan-Kloubert, T. (2023). Transformative learning as societal learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2023, 105–118. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20482>