**Discourses of transformation: an auto/biographical and transcultural interrogation**

We will share our reflection on discourses of transformative learning, and explain our argument that understanding needs to be deeply rooted in real life experience and dialogue, and in richer insight into the conditions for human flourishing. We challenge, in the process, some of the discursive colonisation of the idea of TL. As academics who research in adult education, we value the discourse and hermeneutic possibilities of transformative learning, but have felt dissatisfied by what can be linear, sometimes overly rational, individualistic ways of understanding the term. Or how it gets evacuated of meaning by being all things to all people. There is a need, we suggest, for sounder theorization of terms like transformation, learning and education, when juxtaposed. We introduce examples of how words like transformation are used in common discourse, and in psychology and psychoanalysis, in systemic thinking as well as in education and research. We are concerned that discourses of transformation can have more to do with style, appearance, and surface features of life; as a marketing slogan lacking substance. Moreover, the Jihadi speaks of transformation, and prison may radicalise him in apparently transformative if ultimately destructive ways. But his or her journey has finally to do with closure, with a discourse of purity and resistance to new learning and otherness. We need better articulation of the values that should underlie a more eclectic and qualitative discourse of transformative learning, including the importance of dialogue with the other, in a spirit of democratic fraternity.

We locate popular discourses of transformative learning within the pervasive influence of consumerism; of the commodification of learning and education. Hidden persuaders bring people to think that to “Buy a new car, have a face lift, or do a new course” are ways to transform a life. Consumerism is pervasive, including in educational settings. It touches our lives, every day and often silently. Raymond Williams, the British cultural theorist and adult educator observed how the advertising men and women can hold a reductive view of people and their potentialities, as ‘masses’ to be broken down into the demographics beloved of hidden persuaders. Expensively educated people were ‘now in the service of the most brazen money-grabbing exploitation of the inexperience of ordinary people’ (Williams, 1989: 6). Consumerism at worst objectifies and reduces human beings to units of consumption to be manipulated to keep markets, including educational, stimulated. Students are encouraged to think of education as a product to satisfy and facilitate their success in labour markets, rather than an experiential process that can challenge them to the core.

Thinking in stories – and using qualitative and narrative research – is a way to build deeper understanding, while keeping the complexity of issues in mind. To grasp one’s epistemology, and to become more aware of the discourses we live by, it is necessary to dialogue and struggle with others’ perspectives. We, the two authors, are different, in terms of gender, academic formation, coming from different countries and language communities, which allows us to achieve depth (as in binocular vision, the crossing of two perspectives creates a third dimension, it is not simply a sum of the parts, see Bateson, 1979: 77-79). We try, in the paper, to reflect in a dialogic way on the process of reflection itself, to learn about learning, by talking about the *how* of talking and learning; and of the discourses that infuse the process, for better as well as worse.