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

*Laura Formenti, Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca*

*Linden West, Canterbury Christ Church University*

**Introduction**

We live by discourses of transformation. They are all around us, in advertisements, in every day conversations, in theories and practices of education. Most people seem to take for granted what this word transformation means and accept it without questioning. The theory of transformative learning by Jack Mezirow (2000), well-received in the U.S., but not so generally welcomed in Europe, can be seen to neglect the complexity, limitations, and paradoxes of transformation. A change in the perspectives of meaning – the central concept in Mezirow’s theory – should then entail a critical grasp of the “discourses of transformation” that are dominant in our times. In this paper, we reflect on these issues in a dialogic way, using our personal commitments and differences so as to become more reflexive and to develop a more critical understanding of adult learning and education. We want to learn about learning, namely by focusing the *how* of learning; and of the discourses that infuse the process, for better as well as worse. We will interrogate them from an auto/biographical and transcultural perspective.

**On “seeing”: a metalogue about perspectives, meaning, and transformation**

*Linden – We could start by building a dialogue on perspectives, based on our differences.*

*Laura – We can start by what I call “an exercise of sight”. If we look at the same object, we will see different things. By telling you what I see, I will reveal my perspective, maybe.*

*Linden – Let’s start then. Look at this image. What do you see?*

*Laura – Oh… yes! I see an amazing sculpture, La pietà from Michelangelo. It is white. It is so white that it seems to have a light inside it. And smooth. Polished. Material. Makes me want to touch it, caress it. And you? What do you see?*

*Linden - I see something that speaks to me. It is beautiful and even transcendental. Sometimes you get the same feeling in a landscape. Something beyond representation. Do you think that I should tell my story about my first ever encounter with the sculpture?*

*Laura – No, I had another idea in my mind, wait… Or maybe yes. If you want, please tell the story.*

*Linden – It was a long time ago. I cried when I saw it. I did not know what was happening to me. I saw this sculpture in a corner of St Peter’s in Rome, and thought, maybe felt that “This is beautiful”. It spoke to me then, and speaks to me now more than words.*

*Laura – What you are saying is not only about what you see. Or maybe it is not all about it. It is about memory. A reconstruction. The story of an encounter that touched you inside. This is definitely you. I mean: telling a story.*

*Linden – Well, I was there, in Rome, wandering in this huge basilica, and five to ten minutes later I saw the sculpture. And seeing it provoked in me a strong reaction. I did not know it was by Michelangelo. Only afterwards, walking away from piazza san Pietro, I saw postcards in the souvenir stands, and there it was, dozens, hundreds of reproductions of La Pietà.*

*Laura – I saw it at sixteen, when visiting Rome with my class. I was surprised, I expected it to be bigger, and at that time it was not especially secured or protected. You could almost touch it. Sculptures are so material that I always think about touching them.*

*Linden – Touching is a road towards knowing.*

*Laura – Yes, this conversation was meant to illuminate the process of seeing, and learning by seeing, as a way of knowing that seems so crucial for human life. But perception is more than seeing. It involves a whole human being, body, heart and soul. Memory. Imagination. Do you know John Berger’s Ways of seeing, the book from the BBC series in the Seventies? He claimed “seeing comes before words”; we approach art in ways that are not neutral, we are guided by assumptions, some of them quite problematic. Our sight is affected by what we know or believe.*

*Linden – Yes, of course I know that book. “Every image embodies a way of seeing” (Berger, 1972, p. 10). I liked it very much, but somehow it does not fully satisfy me. It is too materialistic, in the end, in its suspicion towards the idea of mystery and the religious.*

*Laura – Some people would use the idea of a discourse shaping our ways of seeing. Is discourse a perspective? It depends on our position in space and time, not least physical. It is a product of our action in the world. The way I see reveals who I am. There is something profoundly biological, embodied and individual in any act of perception. It is subjective, active and self-confirming. I am the one who selects and focuses. It is a responsibility. And yet, it is social and relational. I learnt this from my father, who was a photographer. He taught to me about light and shadow: we need both, in good proportions, if we want to see. We also need to take a distance, and then to go as near as possible, to discover the little details of a piece of art. This is his teaching.*

*Linden – For me, seeing can be a primitive experience, encompassing, as Berger says, something before words or rationality. Of course, we see in certain ways due to our previous knowing and believing: in this sense, I may be seeing through an uninterrogated cultural as well as a more personal lens.*

*Laura – Yes, and I am happy to show this to the reader by writing a metalogue. The problem is that most of the time we are interested in “what” we see, and we forget everything about the “how”. To know the how, we need dialogue, we need to meet another sight. It is relational. The relationships I have just now, with you, with this place, with Michelangelo through this image of his piece of art, and with my father… all of them make sense of my vision, my thoughts and talking. The context is implemented in the act of seeing. Perception is a process of multiple interactions. It is complex.*

*Linden – Complex and potentially conflictual. Different ways of seeing entail different ideas, values, beliefs. People get anxious when they discover other visions, different from their own.*

*Laura – That is why we need dialogue. When you gave your answer before, I got anxious. It was not what I expected. My assumption was that we were going to talk about our perceptions, but you immediately talked of emotions, or inner feelings, I don’t know, and transcendence… It happens all the time when you ask someone “what do you see?”, this is a simple question, but it reveals the other’s perspective, that is always different from your own.*

*Linden – So, the answer from the other brings a potential difference to our awareness, and maybe can begin a process of transformation.*

*Laura – Yes, this is what I mean: the other’s sight is always different. “A difference that makes a difference”, as Bateson said. Maybe the most relevant of all differences is the other’s sight.*

*Linden – This brings us to the importance of subjectivity.*

*Laura – Yes, but there is a notion of structure, too. Expectations. If I had answered to your question: “I see a postcard”, you could have laughed. We see what is expected, and we share previous knowledge about Michelangelo, postcards, religious symbols…*

*[…]*

*Laura – Linden, why did you show to me this picture?*

*Linden – There was a recent episode. You were also there, remember? In September, my university, during the conference Re-enchanting the academy. In a workshop session, we were asked to describe something that we found enchanting, that touched our souls, I thought the Pietà and told the story that I just told to you. When I went to Rome it was an enormous experience.*

*Laura - What? Rome or this one?*

*Linden - I cannot separate completely. The feeling of being in the Eternal City and the hugeness of St. Peter’s… But then we had a discussion, and another participant, a woman said “When I look at that picture, I do not see anything sublime at all. I see a man’s idealization of women, I see a religion that I do not like and I see patriarchy stamped all over!”*

*Laura – Yes, I can see her perspective.*

*Linden - An Islamist would maybe think that the statue is idolatry, to be destroyed. There were periods of iconoclasm in Christianity too. This statue could have been destroyed. To re-enchant our lives, we need to re-generate these perspectives. We can walk in St. Peter’s – or anywhere else - and let go of the negativity, and the forces that destroy possibilities. The transcendental does not belong to one culture.*

*Laura – When we begin to share perspectives, we have to manage conflict. Now we should discuss about how do we solve conflicts, when different perspectives emerge. My intention was to bring you on a different terrain, to discuss about perspective as a metaphor and as a physical thing. I had in mind the multiple perspectives in art and learning, and the links between seeing, experiencing and telling. I wanted to stress our personal positioning towards ideas.*

*Linden – Yes, this is what we are doing*

*Laura – Really?*

*Linden – Yes, I asked what do you see? This is what you proposed. Then you answered. I also gave my answer to the question. That brought us where we are now.*

*Laura – Yes, but I had in mind many other questions. Maybe they could be asked in another moment.*

*Linden – Yes, I think so.*

**Our own metaphor: an epistemology of seeing**

Gregory Bateson (1979) claimed that nature “thinks in stories”: this claim goes far beyond the power of narratives and storytelling, that we know and celebrate by doing research with auto/biographic methods. It entails an epistemological stance, to find ways that enable us to build a more complex and deeper understanding of the human condition. To grasp one’s epistemology – “our own metaphor”, in Bateson’s language - and to become more aware of the discourses we live by, we need to become sensitive to the pattern which connects, to the differences that make a difference, and to the dilemmas, conflicts, and struggles that we have to face when meeting with others’ perspectives.

Dialogic research is then needed, in times when fragmentation and dis-connection are dominating. The two of us are different, in terms of gender, academic formation, country and language. We experienced different life worlds that shaped our stories. So, our differences were used to write the metalogue and will be used in the following to reflect – separately - on the researchers’ perspectives, with an aim to achieve more depth, as it happens in binocular vision, where the crossing of two points of view creates the third dimension (Bateson, 1979: 77-79). Bateson calls this “double description”: it could be used as an antidote to monologic discourse.

**Learning, Education and/or Transformation?**

We started this dialogue time ago, as we felt inspired and intrigued, as well as troubled, by the theory of Transformative Learning (TL) developed by Jack Mezirow and by a large community of scholars in the U.S. TL is presented as a comprehensive theory for adult learning and we value the practical and hermeneutic possibilities it opens, as academics who research in adult education, however we felt dissatisfied by what can be linear and sometimes overly rational ways of understanding it.

There are hidden and normative discourses behind words like transformation, learning and education: how do we make sense of them, and of their interconnections? *Transformation* is a commonly used – and even abused – word in different settings, as a given for granted promise of happiness, healing, and self-realization. We are concerned about a discourse of transformation that appears too often acritical, stuck at the surface, mostly based on style, appearance, behaviour, rather than engaging with something profounder, existential, psychological, social and even spiritual. Advertisements for cars, insurance policies, banks speak of transformation. A young woman with a surgically modified “brand new body” claims that she feels transformed. The Jihadi speaks of transformation. The Nazi too. Radicalisation is apparently transformative, if ultimately destructive. Can we consider *transformative* any path that reduces our freedom and complexity, and leads to closure, a path inspired by a fantasy of purity and even omniscience, or eternal life, while it builds resistance to new learning and a radical refuse of otherness, as in the Jihadi/Nazi example? Mezirow’s definition of TL addresses specific forms of transformation that lead us to more open, permeable, discriminating, better justified thinking.

Auto/biographical research displays many ways to interpret transformation. Subjective ways, but shaped by collective values. We are also offered some keys to understand an essential feature of genuinely transformative learning: a continuing, emotionally as well as intellectually open experiment in meaning making and engagement with the other. We need to better articulate the values that underlie our understanding of transformative learning, including, as John Dewey taught, the essential importance of dialogue with what may be perceived as foreign, in a spirit of democratic fraternity, as Linden would put it, or in a spirit of biological resonance and interdependence, as Laura would say.

The second term, learning, is open to a range of interpretations. Peter Jarvis (2010) locates it within a dynamic of inner and outer worlds. Learners are made by but also makers of their worlds, and of the meanings given to these. Early learning is still reduced to the process of receiving a culture, in interaction with diverse others, in families, schools, communities, and nowadays via a range of media. This has often been interpreted as a one-way process of socialisation, or acquiring a culture, or being initiated into it. The discourse of our times builds this as a lifelong process, as people are socialised into work, or other roles. Not much attention is given to learning as a biological process of adaptation and coevolution. Biographical research has given a contribution to enable us to see learning in richer ways, as an altogether subtler and deeper, interactive and contextual transformative process. Interactions with prime care givers shows – as already stated by Winnicott (1971) and recently reinforced by Tomasello - how an infant is active within a relational space that is open, or not, for her to be seen, recognised, and thus to play with possibilities, and shape her world. Learning entails inter-subjectivity, and dialogue, as well as space to be a self, from the very beginning.

Education is less and less used in our field. Many refuse it since they interpret education as “a teaching affair”, a process of inculcation. It seems that education is based on socialisation, on forcing humans within an existing socio-political order. Scholars who prefer *learning* to *education* tend to value ‘subjectification’ (Biesta, 2011, 2014), that is the creation of spaces (in families, schools and more widely) to sustain human becoming and flourishing, as well as the possibility to question and challenge authority and received wisdom. A discourse of socialisation is about people fitting into an established order and preparation for the future, whereas ‘subjectification’ is to do with building understanding and action in the present.

Further questions are begged, and we will leave them open: how might we conceptualise change processes and the human subject at their heart? What is ‘the form that is transformed’ (Kegan, 2000) and how do we move across or beyond, into another state or place, as suggested by the *trans* prefix in trans-formation?To what extent should we distinguish and/or combine cognitive change, with shifts in perspective and changing mind-sets, and with more embodied, existential, and felt processes? Do we need more holistic understanding of the human subject, in relation with others and otherness, within whole cultures, one who struggles to relate, to know and make meaning about self, other, and the world and a biography with it? We wrestle with these issues in our ongoing dialogue.

We are troubled, too, and aware that ideas of trans-formation, learning and education are located within contemporary culture, and its pervasive assumptions as to what is normal and is to be desired. Consumerism, as a dominant aspect of our culture, drives our lives. Hidden persuaders of the advertising world are perpetually at work, encouraging us to think that to “buy a new car, re-decorate your house, replace your wardrobe, have a face lift, or even do a new course” are ways to transform who we are and to build the more desirable life. Consumerism is *the* discourse we live by, without realising it. Raymond Williams, the British cultural theorist and adult educator, warned that that the advertising people hold a reductive view of ‘masses’, broken down into demographic categories and then sold a range of products to reinforce lifestyle choices. Expensively trained people were ‘now in the service of the most brazen money-grabbing exploitation of the inexperience of ordinary people’ (Williams, 1989: 6). ‘The old cheapjack is still there in the market…he thinks of his victims as a slow ignorant crowd. The new cheapjack also lives in offices with contemporary *décor*, using scraps of linguistics, psychology, and sociology to influence what he thinks of as the mass mind’ (Williams, 1989: 7). When consumerism uses words like transformation, it objectifies as well as reduces our humanity: we become units of consumption, machines intent on self-gratification, the quicker the better. Material things promise to transform our lives. This discourse, so infusing and structuring everyday experience that we barely notice it, is profoundly antithetical to the deeply human, eclectic, illusive, disturbing, painful and occasionally exhilarating struggle for living (and transforming as a part of it). Adults can embrace as well as to challenge their worlds, and to find meaningful ways of being human, if never completely so. But there are also limitations to this: we can only know and do so much, we are mortal, fragile creatures who easily get out of depth, or over-reach. Maybe transformative learning is also about recognising limitations and cultivating an idea of wisdom.

**Our methodology: a dialogic auto-ethnographic, auto/biographical challenge**

We ground our research in stories: both of us use life-based narrative methods. For this study, we have chosen to write in a biographical, dialogical, and imaginative way, so as to search for moments of transformation in our own lives. We write auto-ethnographically, auto/biographically and dialogically, going back and forth from our own experience to aesthetic representation and reciprocal interpretation. The building of a satisfying theory will be the outcome of the juxtaposition of our differences (Sawyer, Norris, 2012). As Sawyer and Norris propose for duoethnography, we do not need to overcome our differences, or to create a new, encompassing master story. Dialogue means to keep differences alive, by recognizing their legitimacy, and using them to discover one’s own way of seeing, its biographical roots, subjective and social.

Our self-narration is not naïve. We strive to be critical, to build awareness of the discourses we live by; we are also aware of the limitations of our knowledge and capacity to transform, and this is why we need dialogue. Our dialogue includes the difficulties of transforming, for both of us, since we, like everyone else, were born into vulnerability and dependence on others for survival. Transformation, when viewed autobiographically, has many limits; or may be understood in humbler ways. Moreover, no transformation in our lives has been either positive or negative, none ultimately definitive, or necessarily everlasting. We weave deeply personal, familial, as well as socio-cultural and political perspectives in telling our own, and others’, stories. By doing this, we illuminated the constructive role of discourses – some of them abandoned, some still working for us – and the metaphors that helped us to give a form to them. We were able, for instance, to discuss the ways we became at least partially dis-embedded from tradition and heritage, with many difficulties and dilemmas. We used writing to position ourselves in and towards our research: our stories represent and illuminate cultural differences as well as similarities between us.

**Laura, a learning biography and difficult transformations**

The re-construction of (my) learning biography was – for me – a necessary operation, preliminary to any writing, researching, or teaching. A researcher in education is compelled to be reflexive: How did I learn to become who I am? What is transformation in my own life? How do I give a meaning to the messy flow of events that my memory is hardly able to re-construct, to gain some (albeit provisional) orientation to a deeper understanding of my choices and actions? I have chosen some fragments of my learning biography, where I can see how the academic discourse prevented me from embodying my ideas, and recognize them as biographically inscribed. However, these also are, in the longer text I wrote, the only ones where I can see a glimpse of my authentic, embodied experience.

[…] Too much research in education is still done as if the involved people (researchers, participants, readers) were not responsible for the process of knowledge generation, and for its impact in the whole ecology of ideas surrounding them (Bateson, 1972). I never felt like that. I want my theory to be convincing, satisfying for me, bringing an enhanced capacity for orienting me in life, and sustaining an ongoing transformation.

[…] Since studying psychology, at the beginning of the Eighties, I was deeply captivated by those authors who could encourage my attention towards the frameworks of cognition (hence, to my own way of knowing), that is, the epistemological presuppositions and hidden rules which inform human action; which shape me in other words. It seemed that I needed to understand the workings of (my) mind, to be able to think and communicate correctly with others. I had a fascinating tool – I was a good learner, very reflexive and committed - but I possessed no knowledge about *how* this worked. Besides, it was evident that other people had different ideas, and there was no way to establish the ultimate truth, when it came to basic beliefs and presuppositions.

[…] I vaguely felt, at that time, that epistemological awareness could offer a way out of dilemmas that haunted the psychological literature and created disorientation (and harsh discussion!) among us students

[…] Professor Sadi Marhaba (an Indian living in Italy, which was quite rare!) used to say that “The epistemological tissue of psychology is *ripped*, differently from the substantially unitary tissue of traditional natural sciences. These *wounds* took – and still take - a characteristic *antinomic* form: given any epistemological problem, two solutions are proposed to it, and *radically opposed*” (Marhaba, 1976, p. 29, translation is mine). This language is eloquent. [But I was not able to see myself as a wounded person].

[…] I was, and still am, very sensitive to polarities. Maybe due to my experience with highly conflictual parents, or maybe from my penchant for art, I learned to see opposites, and tried to compose them; I am not disturbed by the idea of keeping a difference, or a gap, open and to take care of margins (a clean wound heals sooner), but I also learned that creativity has to do with composition, harmonization, synthesis. I am still in search of my own synthesis, knowing that searching itself is more important than finding.

[…] I am living a transitional moment, and the world itself is in transition. Or, maybe, it is healthier and safer to think like that. If life is conceived as a transition, and not a linear sequence of static photographs, we can be more aware of hidden learning processes, recognize complexity, and sustain more ecological transformations.

My understanding of epistemology or the grounds of what we know (and its relationship with learning) was deeply influenced by Gregory Bateson, who defined it as “the study of how particular organisms *know, think, and decide*. […] the study of the necessary limits and other characteristics of the processes of knowing, thinking, and deciding” (Bateson, 1979, p. 250). This definition connects epistemology to life itself, cognition and biology: it comes from an organism, a living being co-evolving with the environment. It focuses on the *how* and actions, instead of categories or abstract ideas. Hence, it is like philosophy, but only if we think about philosophy as a practice.

[…] Bateson is an important reference – a theoretical friend. Here was a man who sought, more than most, to illuminate the connections between evolution and learning, *Mind and Nature* (1979), in systematic and imaginative ways. His daughter, Nora Bateson, presented her film *An Ecology of Mind,* in Odense at one of our conferences: she introduced the film and reflected with us on her father's idea of learning, and his own way of thinking and learning: whether from the symmetry of a starfish or a crab, or from observing play in wolves and dolphins; or from mothers, babies and their interactions in Bali; or, not least, from his own daughter. A basic point, in Bateson's work, is to realize how limited our grasp is of what we may term the circuitry to which we belong. This is a system of relationships that are hierarchically organized in levels, each one interdependent on the other.

[…] Gregory Bateson was horrified by the lack of wisdom in the human kind; he was worried for the planet, for the growing economic and political disequilibrium (that means, in the systemic theory, a possible escalation, runaway, or destruction of the system itself), the increasing abuse of power and control in relationships, and the mis-communication strategies that destroy human trust. He addressed these themes under the umbrella of “Pathologies of Epistemology” (1972, pp. 478-487). I still remember the impression his words had on me, at a very young age:

*“… complexity occurs in a great many other places besides the inside of my head and yours […] a redwood forest or a coral reef with its aggregate of organisms interlocking in their relationships has the necessary general structure. […] A human society is like this with closed loops of causation. Every human organization shows both the self-corrective characteristic and has the potentiality to runaway”* (1972, p. 482-483).

Which errors was he talking about?

[…] What matters more, to me, is the destruction of the other - from whose health and well-being we depend – it brings us to our own destruction. The (social as well as biological) environment is shaped by all the organisms and circuits of reciprocal interaction that keep it rich and alive; or, on the contrary, drain it, exploit one another, and die. This is also true for social environments, organizations, families. I research on, and with distressed families, and I see the dramatic effects of epistemological errors in their lives.

[…] Going back to my biography, since epistemology is not a profession, I chose the systemic family therapy as the nearest form of intervention to it, since it is based on awareness of complexity and interdependence in human systems. The micro-level of individual and psychological “problems” is connected – by systemic family therapy – to the meso-level of family relationships. The “identified patient” is not the problem bearer: his/her actions are deeply connected with the family epistemology/coherence. I was attracted by the idea that it is possible to foster a better, more ecological life for people living together in the same place, be it a family, a team, or a local community – if their way of inter-acting changes and transforms.

[…] Psychotherapy revealed itself to be too partial an answer to my need of orientation and understanding. I was disturbed by the linear practices of diagnosis, problem solving, prescriptions, and the lack of awareness, or tools, to take care of the macro level. Change became a problematic word for me: it seemed to entail all the epistemological errors that I was trying to escape from: linear thinking, control, power. Education, and namely adult education, offers, potentially, a broader perspective on change in human lives. It allowed me to re-think change in terms of learning.

There was another reason to take more distance from psychotherapy: the need for self-orientation, meaning, direction, choice [this was my hidden quest, unaware then]

[…] the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) Life History and Biography Network. Peter Alheit developed a life history approach in sociological research, with an emphasis on how lives are structured as well as potential sites for what he terms 'biographical learning', or ‘biographicity’ (Alheit, 1995; Alheit and Dausien, 2002). Dominicé was concerned with how to cultivate deeper reflexivity and critical knowledge of self and culture among various professionals (Dominicé, 1990, 2000, 2007). Alheit emphasised the importance of rigour and objectivity in research, also because of the need to establish the legitimacy of such methods in a somewhat sceptical German scientific community. Pierre Dominicé created space in his university to build educational biographies in small collaborative groups, learning from each other. Many other scholars, most of them women, brought to the Network, strong social, critical, and relational sensibilities, that added enormous value in enhancing relationships and keeping alive a spirit of community.

I finish my learning biography by saying that the best I can do is to be aware that I can see only a small arc of a larger circle (N. Bateson, 2016). My ideas, emotions and imagination evolve and combine to build knowledge, I hope not separated from wisdom. Spirituality and art are having an increasing role in my life: I feel the need to play and cultivate a greater and necessary consciousness and interconnectivity, I feel the need to transcend my own discourse.

**Linden, desire beyond fragments**

For me, Linden, the metaphor of ‘fragments’ haunts and energises my work. The problem of fragmentation in myself, maybe, between past and present, appearance and feeling, between who I am and want to be, between the feminine and masculine (West, 1996; 2001; 2016). Fragments are there too in the academy, between different disciplines, and the way in which the academic world is fractured, as Laura notes, by either/or dynamics. It remains disputed that we can legitimately see phenomena through different lenses or perspectives. But this is not to deny major difference either in how we generate knowledge, or between different ways of knowing or epistemologies. We may view the world and ourselves from the heights of Enlightenment reason, objectively, and note that ‘subjectivity’ is seen to be the problem, in that it distorts the pursuit of understanding and truth. Being human is a problem here rather than a resource. Subjectivity/objectivity differences remain potent. A further difficulty is drawing together the complex strands, the circuitry, that constitute a life or learning. Strands that encompass relationships, families, communities, ecologies, and experiences of pain, joy, loss, distress, illusion, love, struggle, disorientation, grandiosity, narcissism, rejection, and finally death. And a strand of transformation but also of frustration and failure in our attempts to understand and change. We may still only see through a glass darkly. We can remain troubled by the interplay of past, present and future alongside feeling hopeful as the future enters the present and past in re-storying a life, in moments of transformation. We need anchoring in the future, knowledge that there is such a place for composing meaning in our lives and learning in the present. The future called this book is an example for me. Herein lies the difficulty of composition, of choosing what to say or not, and of bringing meaning into being. There are feelings of disorientation, and of the uncertainty of not knowing. Maybe the metaphor of fragments works in me because of internal feelings of fracture, of mind separate from emotion, of stifled even sublimated feelings, of messages from the body as well as mind, that all is not well: that there remains work to do in processes of transformation.

Academically as well as personally, the continuing separation of psychological levels of experience from the socio-cultural matters. It made little sense when interrogating my own life, through many years of psychoanalysis as well as doing narrative research. Class, gender, intimate dynamics and psyche are all of a piece in biographical work, as are the dynamics of there and then and here and now, the present and history. The separation of psychology and sociology, and the denial or suspicion of subjectivity, stifles the intellectual and educational imagination. My understanding of transformation straddles fragmented ways of understanding who we are and might be in learning and educational processes.

As a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, I also admit to some scepticism towards the frequent use of the words transformative learning. The more it is talked about, the less convincing it can seem. Deborah Britzman (2003), drawing on Freud as well as the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, has explored the difficulties of self-transformation and the transformation of the other. There is, she suggests, a passion for ignorance, including the commitment not to know what one already knows. Hannah Arandt (1958), writing about the human condition, interrogated life in a communist dictatorship, when a neighbour goes missing. Her work touches on the desire or imperative not to know. People, we, I, turn the other way, not wanting to know or to re-member, for fear that we could be victims too. Memory itself unravels as difficult thoughts and feelings are pushed away, and experience becomes fragmented. Such ‘psycho-social’ defensive processes, or splitting, are not simply relevant to totalitarian societies, but are ubiquitous in our lives and learning.

We may, for instance, repress our envy or hate in a meeting, in a school or university, or towards a lover or friend; we may stifle our desire to be the centre of attention, or disturbing sexual feelings; or our ambivalence in the classroom towards a teacher, because of anxiety about the risk of dependence on the other; an anxiety deeply embodied in largely unconscious ways. Past can colonise the present in a history of insecure attachments from early life which are then played out in the present as we struggle in a new relationship to a teacher or an idea. We may retreat into ignorance or censor the desire to know. I, Linden, have censored difficult thoughts about my imperfections and limitations, in the desire to be best. Transformation might lie in accepting our frail humanity, our imperfections alongside our strengths, what the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein called the depressive position.

Freud used the metaphor of the censor, drawing on Russian examples from the First World War. Letters home were altered and those that arrived were ‘edited’, sometimes severely. He drew attention to our inner censor, the super-ego, shaped by an interplay of authority out there, and internal frailty. What dared not be thought was dispatched to the unconscious, a useful if imprecise metaphor, if ever there was one. Is there in fact a profound resistance to knowing and what are the implications for considering transformative learning and education? Is there what Lacan called a passion for ignorance, which is as strong or even stronger than our desire to know? (Britzman, 2003: 19). We might want to live in our illusions: that we are the best or the worst of people. But it might be the capacity to move beyond fragments, splitting and idealisation or denigration of self, that transformation lies. It can involve a lifetime’s work, on the couch as well as in the classroom, in our intimate relationships as well as the world of thinking and perspective.

The passion not to know, or to engage with difficult experience has been part of my life. A passion called disassociation: as a child of the 1960’s I was unaware that when plotting for a new world how we left the women to tidy up tea cups, while the porters and cleaning ladies tidied up the rest of the mess from our endless meetings. I played the game of being an intellectual socialist, rather than a practising one. Learning to do gender more satisfactorily, in mutually recognised ways, has involved a long, tortuous journey of relational failure and years of psychoanalysis. Moreover, I was once a politician, with a big P, which mattered in my life. But it is not only the advertising men and women who treat people as objects, as a mass, but politicians too. I was as culpable as any.

I have also spent years thinking like a psychoanalytic psychotherapist about education. I thought – and still do, to an extent – that transformation lies in negotiating transitional spaces between people, and between what is known and what might be, to use the language once more of Donald Winnicott (1971). Negotiating in the company of others, our tendency for defensiveness and retreat to the known and familiar or to face outwards and play with new creative possibilities or perspectives. The trouble with psychoanalysis however is its tendency to stay only at the micro level, although Freud wrote about questions of culture and violence too. But staying at the micro-level is not enough when thinking about transformative processes in others’ lives and the stories they tell, as well as in my own. I met new theoretical friends from the realm of critical theory, as part of a study of non-traditional learners in universities (Fergal et al, 2013). Friends like Theodore Adorno and Axel Honneth, who used the term love as a basic requirement for human flourishing spoke to me because they had broken free of the fear of the emotions and subjectivity in the academic project.

[…] We need love in the intimate sphere, but also self-respect and self-esteem in transformative experience. I found loving relationships in the personal sphere as well as self-other recognition in groups like ESREA.

I should mention John Dewey (1998), who figures in my journey (yet another metaphor). His writing on democracy and of the importance of certain qualities of relationship has been influential. Certain groups provide recognition – like a robber band, or a militaristic Nazi group, and can be seductive to young men, and women. But this is at the price of closure to the other, and to different ways of knowing. In this latter sense, the book is the outcome of wanting to engage with Laura around the systemic view of transformation; to understand more of the larger whole or circuitry that shapes our lives. To imagine ideas of transformative learning through the eyes of a different person, a woman, from Lombardy, in Italy, with different experience and academic perspectives.

**Ideas to be developed: a temporary closing**

Discourses shape our seeing. Seeing depends on our place in space and time, on our position (not least physical) and our action in the world. It depends on (and reveals) who we are. It is subjective, active and self-confirming: we select and focus, we see in a certain way due to our previous knowing and believing, to habitudes. However, our seeing is not neutral. It is shaped by previous experience, biographical learning, cultural embeddedness. We wanted to explore and show this to you, the reader, by writing this paper.

We stressed the idea that when we “look at” we are always enacting a relationship with something and/or someone in a context. As humans, we are not meant to see “something out there”, but to enact a world (Varela, Thompson, Rosch, 1991) through relationships in a context. The features of an object – or a subject - are coupled with our capacity to grasp them. Seeing is subjective/objective and contextual/social: it is a process of multiple interactions. It is complex, it demands us to be curious about the *hows* of seeing. However, the question “How do you see?” is not a good one, since we are blind in respect to the how. Unless we begin a dialogue. The answer of the other brings a difference in our awareness. It also disturbs/displaces us. The sight of the other is always different, no matter how much empathic we are, it brings to an experience of *exotopy* (Bachtin). “A difference that makes a difference” (Bateson) depends on us, however: on our capacity to welcome this difference as a relevant information.

In our – still ongoing – shared research about transformation, we identified several topics and questions that will need to be further explored if we want to gain a more complex and deeper view of transformative learning. Among them, the metaphors of form and formlessness that shape late modernity. What does it mean to learn and to trans-form if all is fluid and unstable, if the world does not seem to offer sufficient stability and continuity to make a life on more of our own terms? Maybe perpetual trans-formation is the new norm if never in conditions of our own choosing. How do people learn to be critical towards oppressive forces that are not visible? Is criticality a synonym for transformational learning, or maybe something more is required?

Psychoanalysis, soulwork, embodied cognition, artwork could offer ideas and practices to understand and to sustain the difficult - if not impossible - business of transformation, where defences take many forms and omniscience may be a form of defence against vulnerability and our inability to know very much at all. Education should work as an antidote to overly individualised perspectives on learning: we want to explore better the relationship between ideas of democratic learning, individual and collective transformations, and the role of fraternity and the good group. We also want to consider the artistic, literary and poetic dimensions of human lives, as well as the emerging role of spiritual sensibilities and the light they may throw on their trans-forming. There are many questions, puzzles and possibilities that remain for us, and maybe you the reader. They will be developed in a forthcoming book.

**References**

Alhadeff-Jones, M. (2008). Three Generations of Complexity Theories: Nuances and Ambiguities. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 40 (1), pp. 66-82.

Alhadeff-Jones, M. (2010). Challenging the Limits of Critique in Education through Morin's Paradigm of Complexity. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29 (5), pp. 477-490.

Alhadeff-Jones, M. (2012). Transformative Learning and the Challenges of Complexity. In Taylor, E., Cranton, P. and Ass. (2012). *The Handbook of Transformative Learning. Theory, Research, and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 178-194.

Alheit, P. (2009). Lifelong Learning and Social Capital. In Evans, R. (ed). *Local Development, Community and Adult Learning. Learning landscapes between the mainstream and the margins*. Proc. III Network Conference Between Global and Local, Magdeburg, 28-30 Maj, 2009, vol. II, pp. 27-48.

Alheit, P. (2015). Biographical Learning: Reflections on Transitional Learning Processes in Late Modern Societies. *Culture, Biography, and Lifelong Learning*, 1 (1), pp. 19-29.

Alheit, P. and Dausien, B. (2000). ‘Biographicity’ as a Basic Resource of Lifelong Learning. In P. Alheit, J. Beck, E. Kammler, R. Taylor, and H. Salling Olesen (Eds.). *Lifelong Learning Inside and Outside Schools*. Vol. 2, Roskilde University, pp. 400-422.

Alheit, P. and Dausien, B. (2007). Lifelong Learning and Biography: A Competitive Dynamic between the Macro and the Micro-level of Education”. In West, L. et al. (Eds.). *Using Biographical and Life History Approaches in the Study of Adult and Lifelong Learning: European Perspectives*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, pp. 57-70.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity*. New York: Bantam Books.

Biesta, G. (2006). *Beyond Learning*. *Democratic Education for a Human Future*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Biesta, G. (2011). *Learning democracy in school and society: Education, lifelong learning and the politics of citizenship*. Boston, MA: Sense.

Biesta, G. (2014). Learning in public spaces: Civic learning for the twenty-first century. In G. Biesta,M. De Bie, & D. Wildemeersch (Eds.), *Civic learning, democratic citizenship and the public sphere* (pp. 1–11). London: Springer.

Bohlinger, S., Haake, U., Helms Jørgensen, C., Toiviainen, H., and Wallo, A. (2015) (eds). *Working and Learning in Times of Uncertainty. Challenges to adult, professional and vocational education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Britzman, D. (2003) *After education.* New York: Suny Press

Davis, B., Sumara, D. (2006). *Complexity and Education. Inquiries into Learning, Teaching and Research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Davis, B., Sumara, D. (2008). Complexity as a Theory of Education. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry*, 5 (2). [http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci. Retrieved: Feb. 27, 2016].

Delory-Momberger, C. (2009). *La condition biographique. Essais sur le récit de soi dans la modernité avancée*. Paris: Tétraèdre.

Dewey, J. (1969) ‘The ethics of democracy’. In Boydston, J.A. *The Early Years of John Dewey.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dominicé, P. (2000). *Learning from Our Lives.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Edwards, R., Biesta, G., and Thorpe, M. (2009). *Rethinking Contexts for Learning and Teaching: Communities, activities, and networks*. London: Routledge.

Fenwick, T., and Edwards, R. (2013). Performative Ontologies. Sociomaterial approaches to researching adult education and lifelong learning. *RELA European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 49-63.

Finnegan, F., Merrill, B., and Thunburg, C. (2014) (Eds.). *Student Voices on Inequalities in European Higher Education. Challenges for theory, policy and practice in a time of change*. London: Routledge.

Foerster, H. von (1973). On Constructing a Reality. Re-published in Watzlawick, P. (ed.) (1984). *The Invented Reality. How do we know what we believe we know? (Contributions to Constructivism)*. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, pp. 41-61.

Foerster, H. von (1993). *Understanding Understanding. Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition.* New York : Springer.

Formenti, L. (2008). La com-position dans/de l’autobiographie. *Pratiques de formation/Analyse*. 55, pp. 171-191.

Formenti, L. (2009). Learning and Caring in Adult Life: How to develop a good theory. ESREA Life History and Biography Network Conference *Wisdom and knowledge in researching and learning lives: diversity, differences and commonalities*, Milano, March 12-15, 2009.

Formenti, L. (2010). Homes, trees and rivers: memories and imagination in participatory research with professionals. Proceedings of the ESREA Life History and Biography Network Conference *Representing Lives and Learning. The science and poetics of our work*, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden, March 4-7, 2010.

Formenti, L. (2011a). Metaphors, Stories and the Making of a Satisfying Theory: Transformational Learning for Professionals in Education. Proceedings of the 9th Int. Conf. on Transformative Learning, *Transformative Learning in Time of Crisis: Individual and Collective Challenges.* Athens, Greece, May, 28–29, 2011. Available at: [www.tlcathens2011.gr](http://www.tlcathens2011.gr/); [www.transformativelearning.org](http://www.transformativelearning.org/) [retrieved: Sept. 15, 2014].

Formenti, L. (2011b). Families in a Changing Society: How Biographies inspire Education. Herzberg, H., and Kammler, E. (eds.) *Biographie und Gesellschaft. Überlegungen zu einer Theorie des modernen Selbst*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus, pp. 215-227.

Formenti, L. (2013). From Family Education to Family Learning: What Happens When Professionals Become Researchers. 9th Int. Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Inquiry Outside the Academy. Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, May, 15-18, 2013.

Formenti, L. (2014). The Myth of Birth: Autobiography and Family Memory. Formenti, L., West, L., and Horsdal, M. (eds.) (2014). *Embodied Narratives. Connecting stories, bodies, cultures and ecologies.* Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, pp. 129-148.

Formenti, L. (2016a). Learning to live. The pattern which connects education and dis/orientation. In Formenti, L., and West, L. (eds.) (2016). *Stories that make a difference. Exploring the collective, social and political potential of narratives in adult education research*. Lecce: Pensa Multimedia, pp. 234-241.

Formenti, L. (2016b). Transformative Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. From evaluation to an embodied relational theory. *Adult Education, HAEA Special Issue*, vol. I, pp. 4-11. Available at: www.esrea-interrogating-tl-processes.com [retrieved: June 24, 2016].

Formenti, L. and Castiglioni, M. (2014). Focus on Learners: A Search for Identity and Meaning in Autobiographical Practices. In Zarifis, G.K. & Gravani, M.G. (eds.) *Challenging the 'European Area of Lifelong Learning'. A Critical Response*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 239-248.

Formenti, L., West, L., and Horsdal, M. (eds.) (2014). *Embodied Narratives. Connecting stories, bodies, cultures and ecologies.* Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark.

Formenti, L., and West, L. (eds.) (2016). *Stories that make a difference. Exploring the collective, social and political potential of narratives in adult education research*. Lecce: Pensa Multimedia.

Gergen, M.M., and Gergen, K. (2012). *Playing with Purpose. Adventures in performative social science*. Walnut Creek, Ca: Left Coast Press.

Heron, J. (1996). *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the human condition.* London: Sage.

Horsdal, M. (2012). *Telling Lives. Exploring dimensions of narratives,* London: Routledge.

Hunt, C. (2013). *Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing: Exploring the self in the learning process*. London: Routledge.

Keeney, B. (1983). *Aesthetics of Change*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Jarvis, P. (2006). *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning*. London.

Jarvis P (2010) *Adult and continuing education.* London: Routledge

Johnson, E.S. (2008). Ecological Systems and Complexity Theory: Toward an alternative model of accountability in education. In *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 1-10.

Jörg, T. (2009) Thinking in Complexity about Learning and Education: A Programmatic View*. Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education.* Vol. 6, N. 1, pp. 1‐22.

Leavy, P. (2015). *Method meets Art. Arts-based Research Practice*. Second Edition. New York: The Guilford Press.

Loorbach, D. (2010), Transition Management for Sustainable Development: A prescriptive, complexity based governance framework. *Governance*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 161-183.

Lucio-Villegas, E., and Fragoso, A. (2015). A Tramp Shining. The Popular (Community) Educator in the Age of Lifelong Learning. In Evans, R., Kurantowicz, E., and Lucio-Villegas, E. (eds). *Researching and Transforming Adult Learning and Communities. The Local/Global Context.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 27-38.

Kegan, R. (2000). What ‘‘form’’ transforms? A Constructive-Developmental Approach to

Transformative Learning. In J. Mezirow and Associates (Eds.). *Learning as Transformation; critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 35–70). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.Mason M. (2008) (ed.) *Complexity Theory and the Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

# Maturana, H. (1990). The Biological Foundations of Self-Consciousness and the Physical Domain of Existence. In Luhmann et al. (eds.) *Beobachter. Konvergenz der Erkenntnisttheorien?* München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, pp. 47-117.

# Maturana, H., Varela, F. (1992). *The Tree of Knowledge. The biological roots of human under­standing.* Boston: Shambhala.

Merrill B., West L. (2009). *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: Sage.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning.* New York: Wiley & Sons.

Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning as transformation. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Morgan, G. (1997). *Images of Organization*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Morin, E. (1977). *La Méthode*. Paris: Seuil.

Morin, E. (1992). *Method. Towards a study of humankind (Vol. 1 The nature of nature)*. New York: Peter Lang.

Morin, E. (1999). *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future*. Paris: UNESCO.

Morrison, K. (2010). Complexity Theory, School Leadership and Management: Questions for theory and practice. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 374-393.

Norris, J., Sawyer, R. & Lund, D. (eds) (2012). *Duoethnography. Dialogic methods for social, health, and educational research*, Walnut Creek, Cal.

Osberg, D. and Biesta, G. (eds.) (2010). *Complexity Theory and the Politics of Education.* Rotterdam: Sense.

Rosiek, J.L. (2013). Beyond the Autoethnography versus Ironist Debate: Using C.S. Peirce and C. West to envision an alternative inquiry practice. In Denzin, N.K. & Giardina, M.D. (eds), *Global Dimensions of Qualitative Inquiry*. Walnut Creek, Ca: Left Coast Press, 157-180.

Salmon, C. (2010). *Storytelling. Bewitching the Modern Mind*. London: Verso Books.

Sawyer, R. & Norris, J. (2013). *Duoethnography. Understanding Qualitative Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Snowden, D.J., and Boone, M.E. (2007). A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making. *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 85, No. 11, pp. 68, <http://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making/>.

Snyder, S. (2013). The Simple, the Complicated, and the Complex: Educational Reform Through the Lens of Complexity Theory. *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 96, OECD Publishing. [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k3txnpt1lnr-en>. Retrieved: Dec. 23, 2015].

Stanley, D. (2005). Paradigmatic Complexity. Emerging ideas and historical views of the complexity sciences. In W.E. Doll Jr., M.J. Fleener, D. Trueit, and J. St. Julien (eds.), *Chaos, Complexity, Curriculum, and Culture*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 133‐151.

Taylor, E., Cranton, P. and Ass. (2012). *The Handbook of Transformative Learning. Theory, Research, and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tisdell, E., & Swartz, A. (Eds) (2011). Adult Education and the Pursuit of Wisdom. *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education*, n. 131. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Varela, F., Thompson E. & Rosch E. (1991). *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive science and human experience.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Watzlawick, P. (ed) (1984). *The Invented Reality. How do we know what we believe we know? (Contributions to Constructivism)*. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company.

West, L. (1996). *Beyond Fragments. Adults, motivation and higher education*. Milton Park: Taylor and Francis.

West, L. (2007). An Auto/Biographical Imagination and the Radical Challenge of Families and their Learning. In West, L. et al (eds). *Using Biographical and Life History Approaches in the Study of Adult and Lifelong Learning*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 221-239.

West, L. (2014). Transformative Learning and the Form that Transforms. Toward a psychosocial theory of recognition using auto/biographical narrative research. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 12 (4), pp. 164-179.

West, L. (2016). *Distress in the City. Racism, fundamentalism and a democratic education*. London: Trentham Books, UCL Institute of Education Press.

Williams, R. (1989). *Resources of Hope: Culture, democracy, socialism*. London: Verso.

Winnicott, D. (1971). Playing and reality. London, England: Routledge.