

Loretta Fabbri, Alessandra Romano

# Transformative Teaching in Higher Education



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Loretta Fabbri  
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# Transformative Teaching in Higher Education



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# Introduzione

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*Victoria Marsick, Loretta Fabbri, Alessandra Romano*

## Transformative Perspectives on Teaching

The book contributes to developing a transformative perspective to teaching and learning in Higher Education. This implies an approach to teaching based on promoting change, where teachers challenge learners to critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them (Anand et al., 2020a). This step leads learners to become aware that others share these views and experiences, and that they can learn to take action, individually, and/or collectively, for change.

Transformative learning indicates the process by which we “transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7-8). Mezirow (2009, p. 19) originally identified ten steps of learning in the transformation process:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. A critical assessment of assumptions



4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's own perspective.

In investigating conditions that lead to perspective transformation to happen, Mezirow relies on the theory of communicative action of Habermas (1987), which involves kinds of conversations, discourses that are free, open, and participatory. Habermas described public discourse, yet Mezirow applied these views to interpersonal, individualized discourse. In doing so, he drew on Habermas's ideal speech conditions for rational discourse, despite a lack of supportive research. He thus left adult educators without clear tools for fostering transformative learning through such discourse (Eschenbacher, Levine (2022, pp. 51-52).

Those assumptions inspired Taylor (2012), Brookfield (2009, 2015, 2017) and many other researchers to investigate the methodologies which are effective in eliciting individual and collective critical reflection processes and meaning schemes transformation. According to Merriam and Bierema (2014), the most studied setting for transformative learning to happen is in Higher Education: Higher Education seems to be a natural site for transformative learning to occur because one of its purposes is to offer students an invitation to think creatively, to act in new and enhanced ways, to move beyond their comfort zone of the known, of self and others (Merriam, Bierema, 2014). As a site for learning, an array of activities and strategies has been generated to fos-

ter transformative learning at university. Against this scientific “*humus*”, the book provides some concrete tools that practitioners can use to enhance their (reflective) practice, teaching transformatively (Eschenbacher, 2020).

The authors’ goal is not to lead the reader unthinkingly through a recipe or “quick fix”. Instead, the authors offer templates and examples that demystify the process of undertaking transformative teaching and learning in Higher Education. Critical reflection and other steps in transformative learning cannot be overlooked or oversimplified: *if everything is transformative learning, nothing really is.*

### Becoming a transformative learner

This book is for all teachers and faculty who desire to think about their practice in a transformative perspective. The primary audience for this volume is professors, teachers, and adult educators in Europe such as in other countries. We have presented a repertory of cases for transformative teaching to the readers, mindful that our readers are themselves adult learners as well as professors who design and facilitate educational programs.

When we write of transformation, we are not suggesting that higher education should mold students into a specified form, belief system, or mindset. Higher Education does not make widgets. . . . But it can play an important role in cultivating transformation understood as an ongoing process of intentionally aligning one’s actions and behaviors with one’s evolving sense of identity (Johansson, Felten, 2014). Rather than solely or even primarily preparing students for particular professions, universities must prepare learners to navigate our rapidly evolving world: one where complexity is a dominant feature in which all factors are not just interdependent, but also nonlinearly so – meaning a small change in one may have anywhere from a small to a huge impact on others and the system as a whole. While we cannot possibly know

everything they might face in the future, we already know that university students will live and work with multidiverse people and cultures, requiring them to understand and cooperate across differences. The economy and workplace crisis will continually change, prompting citizens to assess often incomplete information and adjust nimbly (Johansson, Felten, 2014). Their values and beliefs will be challenged.

The particulars of these and other future challenges are impossible to foresee. The way to prepare for these anticipated unknowns is to practice being reflective, creative, and innovative. Teachers and faculty can model opportunities to develop these qualities by prompting students to approach problems with an open inquiring mind, to learn to have dialogical conversations before being faced with a divergent perspective, and to reflect critically on their values. The overall aim is to engage students and faculty themselves in a learning process that is not merely informative but transformative, characterized by deep and enduring changes in thinking that are evidenced through changed ways of acting and being in the world. These shifts appear epochal, seemingly a result of a dramatic event, but they are typically more extended and cumulative processes which can be cultivated *through* the adoption of transformative methodologies (Brookfield, 2015; 2017). Those methodologies combine at least three different types of learning: learning by inquiry, learning through practice, and reflecting in and on experience. At university, this inquiry and practice-based mode of building knowledge has a prominent role. It involves different degrees of learner engagement, interaction, and collaboration, while involved in an iterative process of action, inquiry, reflection, and learning.

Through transformative methodologies, learners *hunt assumptions*, what Brookfield (2017) defines as paradigmatic assumptions (Brookfield, 2017), which are deeply held beliefs or mental models, embedded and often unconscious, that shape how we view the world. Hunting assumptions means unearthing what we believe and determining its accuracy; learners are sustained in see-

ing things from different viewpoints, and taking informed new courses of action (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative methodologies, in this sense, are a repertory of methods and techniques that foster critical reflection *through experience in and on action*, encourage practicing dialogical conversation, facilitate building a learning community, and connecting individual experience to the collective (Merriam, Bierema, 2014). Referring to Brookfield (2017), Fabbri and Romano (2017) outlined four assets of critical reflection:

1. critical reflection does not develop in isolation. It develops over time through engagement with others who bring a wide variety of interpretations, life experiences, and characteristics to any discussion or disorienting dilemma. It is facilitated in the context of engaging the real social, political, and economic structures within any society or culture;
2. critical reflection is not the same as, but is deeply connected to, critical thinking. Thus the work (and the pleasure of helping students become more critically reflective expands their capacity of critical thinking and acting as creative citizens;
3. critical reflection is a holistic practice. It requires the integration of critical thinking, creativity, authentic listening, the capacity for empathy and perspective taking, while acting consistently in the face of unexpected circumstances;
4. critical reflection might productively become a repeatedly enacted aspect of the self, embedded in everyday life situations, which will enable students to fully participate in our democracy.

According to this framework, transformative methodologies push boundaries, embrace difference, and help students to become *whom they are not*. In this volume, transformative methodologies equip learners with a scaffolding facilitation structure that begins with systemic diagnosis both individually and collectively.

A rigorous diagnosis, based on collective inquiry, enables learners to understand system dynamics as they identify leverage points for change. Critical reflection is here intended as a social learning process involving a great deal of individual and collaborative learning: by that we mean that people come to a better understanding of their own assumptions and develop the ability to judge their accuracy and validity only if they involve group of peers as “critically reflective mirrors who provide them with images of how their practice looks to the others” (Brookfield, 2009, p. 133). Supporting learners to become aware of their assumptions, and, in the meantime, keeping high our attention to our unconscious biases, is a puzzling and contradictory task. Very few people can get far doing this on their own: no matter how much we may think we have an accurate sense of ourselves, we are all prisoners trapped within the perceptual frameworks that determine how we view our experiences. To become critically reflective and to potentially transform our influential assumptions, we need an active learning methodology that facilitates learners to stand outside themselves and discuss – in group of peers – how some of their most deeply held values and beliefs lead us into distorted and constrained ways of being (Brookfield, 2009, p. 133).

Fostering transformation of meaning schemes *does require* more time, considering that it requires professors and adult educators to plan and facilitate learning activities with the goal of developing learners’ ability to practice reflection.

The adoption of transformative methodologies offers the scaffolding for creating space for students to reflect, discuss and engage in activities that draw upon their life experiences. Such a space is safe, supportive – where each can listen to others’ experiences without judgment, but at the same time “brave”, challenging taken-for-granted (and often unconscious) assumptions. The concept of “safe and brave” spaces (Arao, Clemens, 2013) is a useful one to invoke: a brave-space classroom is one in which challenges, not attacks, are present, but also where perspectives, theories, and arguments people (both teachers and learners)

would prefer to avoid are ever present. Learners need to be ready to hold differences in tension and exercise critical curiosity on the origins of these different standpoints and the reasons why people feel so strongly that an alternate viewpoint is wrong or dangerous for their safety (Brookfield, 2017).

It is in regard to the above, that this volume – divided in two parts – shed light on the inherent complexity of engaging learners in transformative learning through innovative practices. The chapters propound (a) a methodological focus on the strategic elements drawn out from international models and frameworks, translated into the context of the Higher Education systems; (b) a repertory of teaching practices based on transformative methodologies that are learner-centered, time-bounded, practice-based and reflection-oriented (Watkins, Eileen, Lodge, 2007).

The book includes examples from different organizational and interorganizational settings, most of them related to Higher Education. The introductory chapter by Loretta Fabbri, Alessandra Romano and Sonia Carmignani opens with a reflection on the several levels of innovation promoted by the Teaching and Learning Centers (TLCs) starting from the exemplary case of the TLC of the University of Siena. The Authors clarify and distinguish among three dimensions of innovation that are typically addressed individually:

- didactic innovation, with the implementation of the collaborative and transformative methodologies in teaching practices,
- organizational innovation, with the support of all the activities for the faculty development and the cultivation of faculty communities of practices,
- methodological innovation with the improvement of the student emancipatory and creative skills.

Exploring the contribution of collaboration among institutions and of the dissemination of active developmental methodologies in Higher Education is the focus of Section 1.

In chapter 1, Alexis Kokkos aims at contributing, through a literature review, to the investigation of transformative learning conceptions and educational strategies that are shaped in the context of Higher Education settings.

Chapter 2, by Carlo Orefice, Esteban Sefair Vera and Gina Vindign, offers a case-study on the development of the Latin American Network for Social Change (Red latinoamericana para el cambio social y el aprendizaje emancipativo). In Chapter 3, Maurizio Sibilio provides an in-depth look at the partnership among Teaching and Learning Centers, addressing the purposes, scopes, and relevance of these interinstitutional networks in the service of the innovation in Higher Education.

In chapter 4 Monica Fedeli introduces some techniques and active methods for teaching interactive and engaging lessons.

Unearthing assumptions of power, exclusion and inequity is the focus of chapter 5, where Deborah Kramlich and Yabome Gilpin-Jackson model five practices for cultivating equity and belonging in the classroom.

The group of chapters in section 2 elaborates on transdisciplinary, inquiry-based, and creative approaches to teaching and learning.

In Chapter 6 Luigina Mortari, Roberta Silva and Alessia Bevilacqua propose the discourse analysis as a conversational-based approach to the evaluation of the teaching efficacy. Chapter 7 by Ottavia Trevisan and Marina De Rossi examines the contribution of the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPCK) framework for the development of a technology-transformed education. Mario Giampaolo and Fabio Viola, in chapter 8, analyze the connection between teaching practices and the creative industry, with an emphasis on game-based learning and gamification.

In Chapter 9 Laura Occhini and Nicolina Bosco present examples of teaching through image-based methodology with pre-service childhood and adult educators. Finally, Antonella Lotti, in chapter 10, introduces the topic of Interprofessional Educa-

tion, adopting an evidence-based approach and offering examples of problem-based learning and case-based learning in health practitioners interprofessional education.

All chapters showcase successes, problems and dilemmas encountered as organizations, networks and collaboratives seek to meet strategic challenges for improving teaching in Higher Education. The programs' success here presented depends on new teaching and learning practices in classrooms; yet coordinated action was also needed *across classrooms and student* levels to reach a deep transformation of visions and goals. Throughout this volume, we have addressed the varying roles of professors, students and organizational systems since they are intertwined and entangled. Teachers, as other practitioners, try things out and then take a hard look at whether things really change as expected. "If not, it's back to the drawing board" (Gephart & Marsick, 2016, p. VII). We recognize that single changes may not have much impact in a complex, interdependent system; but we also know that small moves can have outsized impact because of non-linear interdependencies within and across complex systems. Multiple changes may be required, in part to build "critical mass," but also to adjust to unanticipated changes in complex systems that at times are also organically adaptive. Sometimes, these changes might be used to increase alignment over time and, at other times, learners and professors must pivot quickly to respond to unintended consequences.

Effective learning in Higher Education is cognizant of the intersecting roles professors, learners, processes, methods, tools, and context all of which operate in the design and facilitation of transformative learning (Merriam, Bierema, 2014). The design and facilitation of learning in and out of the classroom is the bridge between theory and practice in academia. It represents the moment we must take our theories and body of knowledge and put them into repertoires of practices to cocreate relevant, timely, and engaging learning experiences for super-diverse, non-traditional learners. Again, there's no single formula for creating adaptive and



powerful programs that will ensure learning for all students. Nobody can guarantee that kind of reflective learning with any student. But, we tried to collect and systematize a repertory of practices which can increase the potential to transform in individuals, groups, and organizations. Thus, as discussed throughout this book, there are several transformative methodologies that professors and educators can perform to optimize opportunities to learn *from*, *upon* and *through* the experience (Fabbri, Romano, 2017).

In this sense, the experiences shared in the two sections help Higher Education professors catalyze innovation and sustain performance by understanding learning as an enabling strategic resource. Learning alone is not enough to drive innovation and sustain performance.


Summarizing all the above, we agree and propose that “*Transformative Teaching in Higher Education*” provides an experience-based framework that guides learning, research, and action towards teaching for change in *Higher Education*. This book helps to fill the gap that Eschenbacher and Levine (2022) identified when Mezirow invited educators to foster transformative learning conditioned by “an ideal speech situation” while at the same time “leav[ing] the educator without further guidance in his writings” as to what that might look like and how it could be done (p. 52). Higher education professors will find this portfolio of practices and tools a rich, practical pathway to support their students on the pathway to transformative learning.

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Il volume costituisce l'esito di un lavoro di confronto tra studiose/i interessate/i ai processi di innovazione didattica e sviluppo professionale nei contesti universitari. Gli scenari universitari attuali pongono al centro l'emergenza di produzione e gestione di conoscenze circa le metodologie didattiche necessarie a facilitare apprendimenti significativi ed efficaci per attraversare le nuove frontiere professionali e lavorative.

Lo sviluppo professionale della comunità accademica rappresenta una delle strategie più significative per promuovere innovazione didattica e organizzativa. I *Teaching & Learning Center* sono dispositivi istituzionali finalizzati a validare le esperienze in corso e definire nuove traiettorie di sviluppo.

Il volume propone esempi, casi, modelli di realizzazione di processi di innovazione in ambito universitario. Rende conto della conoscenza in azione nei diversi contesti accademici e dei differenti posizionamenti, letture e interessi. La distintività risiede nel presidio delle modalità di connessione tra didattica, ricerca e innovazione delle comunità professionali e dei presidi organizzativi nell'università. Ogni saggio è stato interpretato come progetto potenzialmente esemplare, che sta producendo risultati, modelli di soluzioni, narrazioni e apprendimenti.

I casi esemplari hanno una funzione determinante nell'introduzione di nuovi paradigmi (Butera, 2020): il volume rappresenta, dunque, l'avvio di un processo che vuole avere come esito la ricerca e la diffusione di concrete attività e operazioni di trasformazione della didattica universitaria, anche attraverso lo sviluppo professionale dei suoi attori.

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