

Transformative Learning in the Era of Post-Reflexivity

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Abstract

This article collects over 20 years of studies, encounters, and conversations around Transformative Theory and reflective practices, which have characterized my identity as a scholar and the Italian Transformative Learning Network's identity. I am going to trace the main challenges that, starting from practice-based studies and situated learning theory, have established the foundation for our research group's discussion on Transformative Learning. I am going to venture into open dialectical arenas with new perspectives that have amazed and questioned me. The posthuman, sociomateriality, and post-qualitative inquiry interrogate some of the foundations of Transformative Theory and urge us to create a creative space to share challenging epistemic constructions.

Key words

Transformative learning, reflective practice, situated learning, posthuman onto-epistemology, post-qualitative inquiry

Introduction

My name is Loretta Fabbri, I belong to that community of qualitative researchers who interact with post-qualitative inquiry, I am an adult education scholar, I belong to the conceptual family of Transformative Learning Theory. I teach at the University of Siena, and I am among the founders of the Italian Transformative Learning Network, a research community that gathers more than 90 researchers from Higher Education institutions or social and organizational contexts and recognizes in the Transformative Learning Theory a shared theoretical and methodological framework. In thinking about the writing of this paper, I have taken my cues from other colleagues (Elizabeth

Adams St. Pierre, Judith Butler, and others): I state that my use of the “I” in the text "replay and resignify the theoretical positions that have constituted me" (Butler in St. Pierre, 2017, p. 687).

When Jack Mezirow's book was published in Italy (2003), we were exploring adult learning studies from a specific interest in organizational learning with other colleagues. We wanted to meet Jack Mezirow and discuss with him to understand Transformative Learning Theory better. We were especially interested in finding new epistemologies committed to thinking about an adult learning theory that was open to new challenges to move the focus from the traditional adult education studies present especially in Europe. In 2006, we organized the first conference in Italy, at the University of Siena. That meeting was followed by others to discuss connections with other theories and the challenges that Transformative Learning posed. We invited Victoria Marsick to Italy for the first time in 2011, and with her, we started a well-established trajectory of scientific exchanges and comparisons. Above all, a fruitful collaboration on the impact of Transformative Learning in organizational and social contexts. Also in 2011, we participated – alongside Claudio Melacarne, Francesca Bracci, and Maura Striano – in the International Conference on Transformative Learning hosted in Athens and organized by the colleague and friend Alexis Kokkos.

I already belonged to a scientific context interested in approaches related to situated learning, the cultivation of communities of practice, and Transformative Learning was another paradigm with which we attempted to answer the same question: how can we support the development and empowerment of individuals, communities, and organizations – starting from their experience as situated people – through the activation and validation of learning processes? The theories called into play identified, albeit from different perspectives, reflexivity as a device for change.

The encounter with Transformative Learning introduced an additional interpretive key on the construct of reflexivity. This is a rational device for analyzing personal experience by making explicit and critically revising the assumptions on which knowledge is structured and justified.

Mezirow recognizes critical reflexivity as the tool for transforming experience meaning and culturally transmitted interpretive structures. Critical reflection – awareness of one's assumptions, premises, criteria, and schemes, followed by vigorous critique – is indispensable and discriminating. Critique and reexamination of the adequacy of prior learning are reflection's distinctive elements.

Reflective practice theory, situated learning theory, and social practice theory preside over multiple aspects: the presence of stories and bodies, the interaction between individuals, artifacts, and contexts, and the creativity and artistry of thinking. One learns through participation in sentimental, cultural, social, and performative practices.

Critical reflexivity is combined with communities of practice. Reflection, in this case, occurs through social interactions, encounters with unfamiliar experiences, and disorienting examples by cultivating those informal aggregations that originate in life and work context. It is necessary to reflect not only on assumptions but also on the organizational individuals' meanings and their reification into material artifacts.

Transformative Learning in Italy has been an accelerator of a debate already grappling with the discussion of critical reflexive forms of rationality in personal, social, and work contexts. What I have described is the terrain on which we have sown Transformative Theory and what distinguishes our research group.

Now, I would like to discuss the new challenges that come with developing our scientific heritage and being surprised by new ideas. I am intentionally leaving my argumentation unfinished because it is still being constructed. As Patti Lather and Elisabeth St. Pierre wrote "we always bring tradition with us into the new, and it is very difficult to think outside our training, which, in spite of our best efforts, normalizes our thinking and doing" (Lather & Pierre, 2013, p. 630).

Post-reflexive postures

Why do I talk about Transformative Learning starting from reflexivity? This construct, whose scientific narrative portrayed it as a device capable of transforming reality, was the first thing that captured my interest. At that time, the scientific debate was

stagnating between positivist paradigms, quantitative methodologies, and ontological realism.

I encountered Transformative Learning theory while conducting my postdoctoral research on the study of practice, during what has been described as a reflexive turn within transdisciplinary trajectories. Since the 80', in Italy reflexivity has become an exemplary paradigm from an epistemological and methodological point of view.

The first trajectory started from organizational studies, particularly from theories of practice. I owe much to Schön (1983), the scholar who founded the theory of reflective practice. His thesis emerged through a thorough analysis of the thinking patterns of professional practitioners in the maker or designer field, that is, those responsible for transforming events. It challenges that form of technical rationality that fails to recognize the complexity of professional epistemologies in organizational practices. Those dealing with value conflicts, disorienting dilemmas, and critical incidents do not rely on technical knowledge alone, nor on scientific rationality alone, but call into question other forms of thinking. Thinking in practice, knowledge in action, and thinking in contexts of high practical density requires the artistic exercise of multiple rationalities (or irrationalities) emerging from situated contexts. These are forms of thinking capable of thematizing the unexpected, and improvising, generating, not just validating, new knowledge in creative ways (Nicolaidis, 2022; Bracci, 2022). This scientific grounding has linked us to the search for plural forms of thinking, not necessarily reducible to rationalist logics. The knowledge that emerges from practice has transformative force because it is embodied in interest and value conflicts. The disorienting dilemmas that characterize the practical world require artistry, intuition, and experience.

The unpredictability of practices, the need to cope with the unexpected, and the incidental learnings that actions bring with them require multiple reasons.

Mezirow, almost simultaneously, recognized critical reflexivity as the most powerful means of validating the premises by which women and men interpret the world. To speak of Transformative Learning is to speak of reflexivity, a construct that has long contained the drifts of positivistic expansionism about the world. The thesis that

learning assumes a transformative value when creating the conditions for subjects to decontextualize their ideas and representations in order to acquire greater awareness of their actions (how they arose, in what specific situation, and what consequences they produced) becomes one of the possible cross-sectional interpretative models. Under what conditions does learning produce transformation? Transformative Theory involves reflexivity, which is defined as an intentional pause that allows one to take a more open-minded view and access analytical thinking. Does it remain anchored in forms of rationality that today we would call universalistic because they are not intersectional?

For the past two decades, our research community has been focusing on incorporating other theories of reflexivity to place this construct within a more complex interpretive framework.

Living among plural epistemologies. Loving our lagoons

When I approached Transformative Learning Theory, I needed to maintain my focus on situative epistemologies and reflective practice theory, with the objective of reorienting the possible and imaginable thinking methodologies.

I provide a brief overview of two constructs dear to my heart: the theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These learning theories allow for the formation of alliances that are both transpersonal and transrational. Throughout my research journey, I have found that both constructs have limited rationalist and individualistic tendencies, unlike, in part, Transformative Learning Theory. These constructs stand far from the risk of a Cartesian interpretation of the reflexive device.

Lave and Wenger's concept of situated learning is associated with the community of practice and with its relational, communicative, cultural, and operational value: "agent, activity and the world mutually constitute one another" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33). Two authors I felt ontologically close to. Anthropologist Jean Lave recalls some studies published at the same time as the 1991 text "Situated Learning". She uses situated learning to respond to those who had described learning as a form of internalizing knowledge or simply sharing knowledge. Based on the study of

circumscribed contexts, situated learning emerges as a process through which a person participates in the community systems of practice to which he or she belongs. Together with Wenger, she proposes a perspective that states that learning, thinking, and knowing are relationships between people active "in and with" the socially and culturally structured world. Learning can be understood as the historical production, transformation and change of people.

This perspective points to a rather diverse field of individuals composed of novices and experts, characterized by asymmetric and peer relationships, more or less accessible and transparent activity systems, and a consequent plurality of forms of participatory relationships (Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Situated learning theory brings in an intersectional idea of Transformative Learning. Paradoxically, we can say that Transformative Learning does not exist. There are as many transformative learnings as there are genders, ethnicities, forms of power, and social class membership. I begin to have the awareness of being a white researcher belonging to Western culture, at constant risk – despite myself – of racializing research.

The posthuman perspective. Toward a posthuman theory of Transformative Learning?

This perspective introduces a distinction between humanist and posthumanist approaches that I have not thematized. I have always started from the humanist assumption that human beings are the main source of agency. Methodologically, I have been interested in human individuals and the objects with which they reify their meanings. I was born a socioconstructivist; moving beyond a neo-positivist idea of the subject/object, nature/culture, mind/body, masculinity/femininity, rationality/irrationality relationship seemed fundamental to me. I'm talking about the 80s. I had few doubts thereafter.

In recent years some encounters, other readings surprise me: for example, non-dualist theories of the interaction between nature and culture. Some theses argue that socioconstructivism is based on a categorical distinction between the given (nature) and the constructed (culture). What does it mean to talk about Transformative

Learning by taking a posthuman perspective? And/or a theory of posthuman subjectivity?

To this day, I know that I plan to make plenty of creative space for these perspectives. Is Transformative Theory grounded in a humanist paradigm? I think so. When we talk about Transformative Learning, does it refer to a universal human, white, and Western attribute? We could answer that in fact Transformative Learning Theory was born based on Mezirow's work with a group of adult women who had resumed their studies, that Transformative Learning is linked to Freire's processes of conscientization, to the Frankfurt Critical School. And this is unquestionably true. We can also say that critical rationality is grounded in a universal rationality that presupposes high symbolic competence to access the transformation of meaning perspectives.

We may add that posthuman theories are emerging at this historical moment. Therefore, taking note of limitations and reductionism means studying possible futures characterized by conceptual uncertainty – uncertainty that guarantees a generative confrontation, whatever the outcome.

Following posthumanism has meant starting to think that we can move beyond how our humanity has been theorized (Braidotti, 2013). What are the aspects of the posthuman that question us? Two colleagues in particular are my primary references. Rosi Braidotti, known through her important trilogy, and Silvia Gherardi.

A fundamental contribution to contemporary epistemologies comes from Braidotti, a feminist philosopher. "The post-human condition is neither post-power nor post-injustice. The emphasis on post in the posthuman implies, rather, a desire to move forward, beyond traditional forms of defining the human and even beyond the politics of classical emancipation" (Braidotti, 2022, p. 17).

"Who or what counts as human in the contemporary world?" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 7). How can we thematize the critique of the humanistic ideal of human as the universal measure of all things? Can the posthuman represent, even for Transformative Theory, a navigational tool, a theoretical figuration that allows us to question the material and discursive phenomena of mutations triggered by technological developments,

feminist studies, and post-colonial epistemologies? What I can say for now is that these questions trigger research paths that aim to highlight the positive potential of posthuman convergence and offer tools to address it positively.

The post-qualitative perspective

Transformative Learning Theory, as well as reflective practice theory, have been a major methodological umbrella. They produced a grid of methodologies for research whose purpose was to create knowledge and promote change. Action science (Argyris & Schön, 1978), action learning (O' Neil & Marsick, 2007), action learning conversations (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009), and collaborative research (Fabbri, 2019; Shani, Guerci & Cirella, 2014) have been deterrents to the neo-positivist wave in an age of big data.

Some colleagues wonder what would happen if we paid less attention to external pressures and changes. Whether it is appropriate to confront the implications of the "post" (Leather & St. Pierre, 2013). As researchers who have adopted a humanist qualitative methodology, how can we think beyond our training? What steps can we take to avoid being and reasoning as researchers who delude themselves into perspectives that Donna Haraway call "ways of being nowhere while claiming to see completely"? She suggests that it pays to replace this claim of universal knowledge with viewpoints "from somewhere" (Haraway, 1991).

The sociomaterial perspective

If we bring the sociomaterial perspective into the domain of Transformative Learning, we need to thematize some issues.

Learning is transformative. It is a happening that invests the sociomaterial dimension. Latour argues that no phenomenon can be adequately described unless individuals abandon artificial distinctions between lines of thought and direct their attention to the empirical reality that people, ideas, objects, artifacts, nature are joined in an intricate web of associations developing over time. Interdisciplinary conversations are open about what it means to be human in the context of people's implications in the planet's fate. What does it mean to be human if human and nonhuman are not individually definable? Neither can be explained in terms of the other if neither has a

privileged status in determining the other (Barad, 2003). What if we think about the meaning perspectives from the assumption that meaning is not a property of individual people, but can be interpreted as a continuous performance of the world in its "differential intelligibility" (Somerville, 2016).

I believe that traditional classifications on different representations of Transformative Theory need to cross more challenging territories.

We are exploring what it means to bring these discussions/conversations into the domain of Transformative Learning analysis. We want to study these elements to explore how they impact Transformative Learning Theory in the post-reflexivity era.

Can we talk about post-reflexivity today? What causes us to critically discuss the theoretical and empirical foundations on which Transformative Learning is based?

These constructs represent some of the challenges that our group is interested in exploring, placing itself within an open-ended show to which something can always be added (Gherardi & Lippi, 2000).

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