

Editor's Notes: Academic Assumptions, Institutional Boundaries and Transformative Education

Journal of Transformative Education
2024, Vol. 22(4) 351–357

© The Author(s) 2024

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/15413446241289241

journals.sagepub.com/home/jtd



It is autumn and I am getting ready for a new academic year, preparing materials for classes, muddling through administrative tasks, reading and writing. This year, like most previous years but not all, it feels like a genuine privilege to be an academic on the cusp of a new term. There is the excitement that comes with the anticipation of meeting new students and reconnecting with existing ones as well as enough spaciousness to allow for unhurried thinking and the luxury of slow reading. But even in the quiet season we remain, to use Peter Fleming's (2021, p. 27) apt phrase, on the 'treadmill of justification' of the neoliberal university – the pointless paperwork, pinging emails which are much ado about nothing and, always and everywhere, the seemingly endless mania for measurement. I imagine many readers of this journal who follow the typical European and US academic calendar will have been doing very similar things, including walking on the treadmill, in various emotional states ranging from joy to boredom.

Nothing extraordinary at all in this, but I mention it because I think it is worth occasionally pausing to consider how everyday professional experience of this sort is nested within a vast international network of activity. Estimates vary a great deal, but there are perhaps six million academics and up to 250 million students in higher education worldwide. Think of what that involves: innumerable learning encounters, hundreds of thousands of courses and programs across tens of thousands of institutions. Pumping across the system are publications, the number of which is steadily increasing all the time. Global higher education is dynamic and changing with rapidly proliferating areas of interest and over time disciplines, areas of inquiry, bodies of theory and approaches to research are formed, reconfigured and sometimes disappear. The exponential growth of higher education, increasing specialisation and wider epistemological and cultural changes means this vast system is also highly fragmented (see Burke, 2012 for a useful historical perspective of some of the trends and tendencies at work). From a systemic perspective, an extraordinary amount of social energy is now being dedicated to the maintenance, production and transformation of 'higher' knowledge across a vast, diverse global archipelago.

The transformative learning community that this journal serves is mainly but not exclusively located within higher education (HE). The boundaries of the community are blurry though, and articles in the *Journal of Transformative Education* often look

'outside' HE at professional, workplace, community, social movement and informal learning. This is not an accident and in historical terms we can locate the ideas that are most frequently drawn upon in this journal such as transformative learning theory and critical pedagogy at being formed outside and at the boundary of the higher education system (e.g. in community development and in adult and popular education). Being at the boundary of established institutions has many disadvantages, but I think it is indisputable that this also nourishes criticality, creativity and innovation. Being at the boundary, or troubling the boundaries, of higher education allows us to bring into view and reflect upon the cluster of assumptions that we as academics and the institutions we are part of rely on. Thinking critically and imaginatively at the edge of existing knowledge institutions is in my view a crucial element of the purpose of the *Journal of Transformative Education* and this troubling of the boundaries and questioning or traditional academic assumptions is a major theme of this issue.

The first article entitled 'Transformative agency in times of global crisis' is by Tamar Chen-Levi, Yaffa Buskila and Chen Schechter looks at what happened to teachers in Israel during the COVID lockdowns. The chaos, difficulty and fear that characterised these events has somewhat faded out of view as other political and social crises have taken centre stage in the past 2 years. The article is a useful reminder of just how significant crisis this was: health systems were overwhelmed as people became ill in extraordinary numbers; the flow of people and things suddenly halted, container ships stayed in docks, airplanes remained on the ground and the roads were empty throwing global supply chains into complete disarray; and more proximately, daily interaction with others – the encounters that to a large extent define and gives meaning to life – was radically curtailed. Curious about the significance and impact of the crisis on education, Chen-Levi, Buskila and Schechter interviewed 20 schoolteachers about their lived experience of the crisis and their perceptions of the pedagogical and institutional responses to the lockdown.

They note 'the complexity of teaching in times of crisis requires an understanding of teachers' agency relative to the constraints and opportunities brought on by the crisis'. Making sense of teachers' agency in crisis means taking account of the positive and negative emotions produced by the crisis and the technical and organisational supports which were available. They found that being able to deal with these emotions, promoting well-being trust and transparency were important affordances. One of the strengths of the article – in part due to the way they use of Engeström et al. (2014) Cultural and Historical Activity Theory – is the emphasis they give to the material, organisational and collective dimensions of agency, something that is quite often downplayed in transformative learning.

The second paper 'Transformative way of becoming a teacher: A phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis of class teacher education in Finland' traces the boundary of the limits and possibilities of existing education systems in a different way. The author Minni Matikainen conducted her research on the learning of 11 students enrolled teacher education course over 2 years. The findings are primarily based on observation, drawing on Husserlian phenomenology, but also draw on

students writing and reflection. A key proposition here is that the dispositions, values and assumptions of educators have a significant bearing on the ‘the quality of their pedagogical reasoning’.

Both the institutional and the national contexts for this research are significant. These students were enrolled in a heterodox teacher education program –Critical Integrative Teacher Education – which is underpinned by critical pedagogy, social theory and psychodynamic ideas. As one might expect given these theoretical and pedagogical commitments, the course is structured in a way that asks these students to examine their assumptions carefully. Matikainen argues that the data indicates that this process had a significant impact and that there is clear evidence of individual and collective transformation in the data. This process also followed a clear pattern: from a starting point of habitual and unreflective meaning making which is then ‘cracked’ by course activity leading to a sense of deep ambivalence which through the ‘forward momentum’ of the course then led to transformation. According to the data, this created opportunities for new ways of thinking about school and the teaching profession as well as personal growth. It is noteworthy that Matikainen developed this account of phases in learning by following the phenomenological process of eidetic reduction and only secondarily began to link this to the work of Jack [Mezirow \(1991\)](#) and Knud [Illeris \(2014\)](#). In this sense, the article offers a rich, grounded account of transformative processes which validates the explanatory value of transformative learning theory.

The specific assumptions that were transformed through the course are also of note. In the beginning the students assumed that education has to be hierarchical and students should be passive. This shifted radically over time to a dialogical and collaborative conception of education. This shift supported the student teachers’ transformation into active, autonomous and reflexive educators who are comfortable with complexity and epistemic fallibility. As one student Tytti who took part in the study puts it: ‘Instead of one right answer, I was left with lot of questions to ponder’. This is a transformation which can be usefully described in [Freirean \(1972\)](#) terms as a move from a ‘banking’ approach to education – the top- down transmission of static knowledge - to a ‘problem posing’ collaborative approach to education based on open inquiry and critical reflection. In [Freirean \(1972\)](#) terms, this can be described as a move from an assumption that ‘banking education’ – the top-down transmission of static knowledge to a problem posing approach to education based on open inquiry.

In this sense, we are brought back again to consider the limits of education as it generally organised with an added layer of interest because this critique is being levelled at Finnish education. For a variety of reasons (e.g. comparatively high levels of investment, the high status given to teaching as a profession and the excellent outcomes in international assessment), Finland enjoys an extraordinary reputation for its education system, yet we learn that without an innovation and reworking of institutional norms there is a strong tendency to reproduce ‘banking’ education.

Our third paper comes from two prominent transformative learning researchers in Europe – Ted Fleming and Alexis Kokkos. The article ‘Toward a Pedagogy of Critical and Social Imagination: The Arts in Adult Education’ makes a case for prioritising the

arts in adult education and also shares guidelines on how the arts can be fruitfully employed to support transformative learning. Quoting Maxine Greene they write engaging with art can help break through ‘the crust of conventionalised and routine consciousness’ (1973, p. 183) by exposing how things are in the world and by tapping into the imagination.

The authors are especially interested in how the arts can be used in adult learning groups arguing that the polysemic quality of works of art, and the multiple interpretations which stem from this, nourish deep critical exploration. Like many other researchers interested in the relationship between art and transformative education, they make the case that the arts help foster embodied, holistic learning that allows educators to scaffold bridges between biographical experience and social and political questions.

In the latter part of the article, Fleming and Kokkos describe in more detail how they approach these matters pedagogically and discuss a method called the ‘Transformative learning through aesthetic experience’ (TLAE). In the preliminary stages, the educators explore students’ personal experience and identify aspects of assumptive world. This then informs the selection of pieces of art which are then used in the group process of interpretation and critical reflection. In discussing this, the authors foreground encounters with fine art (paintings and an installation), but TLAE is, and has been, used with film and literature and other art forms (see also Kokkos, 2010, 2021).

In framing these ideas and the method, they draw heavily on John Dewey’s (1934, 1938) notion of experience, Maxine Greene’s (1995) existentially inflected conception of becoming ‘wide-awake’ through engaging with art alongside Paulo Freire’s (1970, 1972) idea of critical decoding and ‘reading the world’ in terms of power (see also Freire & Macedo, 1987). They also build on the excellent work of Ira Shor (1987) on teaching and curriculum. In this regard, the article is an interesting example of how transformative education brings together North American, European and South American ideas in a way that creates a politically, pedagogically and methodologically distinct approach to critical theory. There is none of the cultural pessimism and political indirectness one finds, in for example, Adorno’s (1991) discussion of aesthetics in modern capitalism; instead, the emphasis is on social possibility based on a deep trust in adult learners’ capacity to make sense of experience in personally and politically useful terms.¹ As such, art in adult education, Fleming and Kokkos aver, can lead to transformative learning and offer clues about how we might rethink the way we typically approach higher education.

The next piece in this issue is ‘Emerging Transformative Learning Journey to Foster Sustainability Leadership in Professional Development Programs’. In this article, Rachel Brooks and Ann Brooks explore how the ‘macro’ issues connected to sustainability, equality and social justice which gave rise to the United Nations’s (2015) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require innovative forms of learning and teaching. Dealing with complexity and uncertainty and acting reflexively and effectively to contemporary challenges will, amongst other things, demand a major rethinking of the boundaries of higher education. In trying to respond to this demand, the researchers, based in the Competence Center for Social Innovation at the University of

St Gallen in Switzerland, designed a transformative sustainable leadership course for professionals.

The article describes the course in some detail. Through a multistage process – which the authors characterize as a transformative journey – the aim is to develop the inner capacities, skills and knowledge necessary for sustainability. The course begins with place-based education which immerses participants in natural setting to build a sense of connection with nature and to begin to critically reflect on how we are entangled in webs of life. This is followed by discussion and groupwork on a case study related to sustainable food production. In the latter stages, students are asked to engage in ‘design thinking’. Design thinking is, the authors write, ‘a methodology for driving use focused solutions’ which involves exercises in clarification, envisaging and experimenting that help people acquire ‘individual skills that can support participants in carrying out meaningful local actions’. This then leads in a cycle of action learning as a learning community where people from varied backgrounds and diverse interests begin to trace common pathways to action for sustainability. The article serves – as intended – as a useful resource for other practitioners interested in sustainability education.

The authors conclude by saying they wish to continue exploring how to ensure sustainability education is genuinely impactful. This strikes as an urgent question and one which we wish to actively encourage researchers to explore in future issues of the journal. As Adam Greenfield notes ([Greenfield, 2024](#), p. 18), ‘Legislatures and private interests worldwide continue to make decisions that are inconsistent with a survivable future’ and there is abundant evidence that we are entering into radically new ecological, climatic and political circumstances.

‘Measuring and validating a transformation learning survey through social work education research’ is a mixed method study on the efficacy of reflective journaling in social work education across eight countries Canada, India, Israel, Jersey Island, Spain, Sweden, Britain and the USA. Written by Michael Wallengren Lynch, Ana-Isabel Corchado Castillo, Beth Archer-Kuhn and Larrison Earls, the article explores the relevance of critical reflection and transformative learning theory to social work.

The cross-country comparison of data offered by the authors is fascinating. They point to strong evidence for the efficacy of journaling across national and institutional contexts but that to some extent there are noticeable cultural differences in learning preferences (such as sharing work with peers).

Above all, it is a noteworthy contribution to the burgeoning body of work on standardised tools and instruments for assessing transformative learning (see [Acheson & Dirkx, 2021](#)). They remind us that boundary crossing and critical reflection is also a methodological matter and that vibrant transformative education scholarship depends on methodological pluralism and experiment.

The sixth and final article in this issue of the *Journal of Transformative Education* is ‘Designing identity transformations through transformative learning objectives and experiential learning competencies’ is by Jamin Rowan and Mat Duerden. The essay deals with course design and curriculum development based on research on a study

abroad programme of a US university (albeit one which was disrupted by public health measure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic).

Based on their research, they propose that lifelong learning can be usefully facilitated by explicitly orientating ‘students towards a personal, intellectual and/or social transformation rather than or in addition to an academic discipline’s body of knowledge and skillset’. This is of course an argument which has been made very frequently in adult education research by thinkers from a wide range of theoretical and practitioner backgrounds. Radicals, humanists and psychoanalysts all agree on this matter and the peculiarities of the historical formation of adult education means that this idea was, and in many places remains, a defining characteristic of adult education.

As such, the reassertion of this idea in a higher education context is valuable in itself, but the article is also noteworthy because the topic is framed in a novel way. A good deal of this novelty lies in how the authors appropriate and adapt the language of outcomes and competences which is ubiquitous in assessment and curriculum design. As readers will know, there has been extensive debate internationally about the rationale, general value and specific applications of ‘outcome-based’ education (e.g. [Allais, 2014](#); [Bernstein, 1996](#); [Biesta, 2010](#) etc.). A common refrain is that it tends to hollow out education. However, in this article the idea of outcomes is linked to transformative learning especially in terms of shifts in identity ([Illeris, 2014](#)). The authors make the case than naming and specifying this supports transformative learning processes.

Just as interestingly, they advocate for the value of experiential learning competences in course design. Again there has been a great deal of debate over ideas of competence (see [Olesen, 2020](#) for an incisive discussion of this). They define this as ‘an experiential literacy that enables students to read, assess and find meaning in a variety of situations’. Again this renews and reconfigures an idea which has been central to the field stretching from [Dewey \(1938\)](#) through to [Freire \(1972\)](#) up to [Alheit, 2021](#). In a short but very stimulating part of the essay, they discuss how ELOs are imagined in relation to transformative objectives and I look forward to seeing these ideas developed further in the future. It seems appropriate to close this issue, and the themes of boundaries and academic assumptions, with this rearticulation of the good sense of adult education.

This issue also features a book review by one of our long-standing editorial board members Michelle Glowacki-Dudka of Alexis Kokkos’ new book.

Fergal Finnegan
National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Ireland

Note

1. The contribution of adult education to an agentic, politically committed approach to critical theory is underappreciated and is a topic that is certainly worthy of further research.

References

- Acheson, K., & Dirkx, J. M. (2021). Editors' introduction to the special issue of the journal of transformative education on assessing transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 19(4), 295–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446211045158>
- Adorno, T. (1991). *The culture industry: Selected essays on mass culture*. Routledge.
- Alheit, P. (2021). Biographicity as 'mental grammar' of postmodern life. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 12(1), 81–94. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.ojs1845>
- Allais, S. (2014). *Selling out education: National qualification frameworks and the neglect of knowledge*. Sense Publishers.
- Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research, critique*. Taylor & Francis.
- Biesta, G. (2010) *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics and democracy*. Paradigm.
- Burke, P. (2012). *A social history of knowledge: Volume two from the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia*. Polity.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art and experience*. Paragon.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. The Macmillan company.
- Engeström, Y., Sannino, A., & Virkkunen, J. (2014). On the methodological demands of formative interventions. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 21(2), 118–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2014.891868>
- Fleming, P. (2021). *Dark Academia: How universities die*. Pluto Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Cultural action for freedom*. Harvard Educational Review.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. P. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word & the world*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination*. Jossey-Bass.
- Greenfield, A. (2024) *Lifehouse: Taking care of ourselves in a world on fire*. Verso.
- Illeris, K. (2014). *Transformative learning and identity*. Routledge.
- Kokkos, A. (2010). Transformative learning through aesthetic experience: Towards a comprehensive method. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 8(3), 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344610397663>
- Kokkos, A. (2021). *Exploring art for perspective transformation*. Brill.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Olesen, H. S. (2020). The Challenge of Competence Assessment: Problematising institutional regimes – proclaiming a paradigm shift? In F. Finnegan & B. Grummell (Eds.), *Power and possibility: Adult education in a diverse and complex world* (pp. 75–84). Brill | Sense. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004413320_007
- Shor, I. (1987). *Critical teaching and everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our World: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. UN.