


# Transformative Learning and Experience: Forging New Learning Links Between the Personal and Political

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores experience that is both misconstrued and under theorized in adult education. Human experience is expressed in the public sphere as the motivation for social and political change. The connections among experience, the public sphere, and democracy are identified. The allies in exploring the role of experience in education are John Dewey and Jack Mezirow's transformation theory and their understanding is a basis for outlining a more critical theory-inspired understanding of education as the reconstruction of experience. The work of Oskar Negt on experience will be the starting point for engaging in re-thinking the role of experience in education. This will be the basis for exploring the transformation of experience as a way of better understanding aspects of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. The author concludes with a brief presentation of sociological imagination as the key to developing a pedagogy of imagination and a pedagogy of the transformation of experience. Hannah Arendt's work provides a thread woven through the paper.

## KEYWORDS

Arendt, Dewey, Experience, Imagination, Mezirow, Public Sphere, Sociology of Imagination, Transformative Learning

## INTRODUCTION

The Mater Hospital in Dublin has a long history of coping with pandemics. There was cholera in 1866, smallpox in 1871 and, in 1918, Spanish influenza killed 25,000 people. Medical experts at the time of the influenza epidemic spoke through *The Irish Times*: 'If the country would only wake up to the seriousness of the condition of things and avoid meeting in crowds' (Chambers, 2021, p. 64). An eyewitness wrote about looking out a window 'to watch the cavalcade of funerals trotting quietly and inevitably' toward the cemetery (Chambers, 2021, p. 64). It is not always the number that die which makes the greatest impact, but how the events are experienced. The long institutional memory of these pandemics also impacts on future experiences.

Today, hospital staff experiences the emotional impact of COVID. The unthinkable has happened everywhere. Experience leaves deep scars and live on in the memories of individuals and of communities. There was scarcely time to wonder about the meaning of the unfolding experiences. What would it all mean for the individuals concerned, their families and the wider society?

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In a recent interview on CNN (Wallace-Wells, 2023), Anthony Fauci (Head of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases during the COVID years) offered a timely review and assessment of responses to COVID 19. Fauci offered three thoughts as part of his considered reflection. 1) There was a crisis of imagination that led to the overall difficulty in the USA of even imagining a COVID epidemic as possible. Too many he concluded, had lost the ability to imagine how a virus could lead to so many deaths and other long-term consequences. 2) Scientific knowledge was politicized. This complex story is about attitudes to authority, suspicions about the status of scientific knowledge and divisive ways in which these issues were presented politically. 3) The failure of public health policy. These comments highlight deeply felt experiences, etched on memories and making an as yet unknown impact on the future. They cast long shadows. Experience is undertheorized in educational thinking.

## PROTESTS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Public protests are frequent events around the world. There are protests against raising the retirement age for workers in France, protests against the Supreme Court decisions in Washington DC. Experiences prompt protests. Other protests in Syntagma Square (in 2011) and in Plaza de Catalunya, Barcelona (also 2011) expressed the indignation of citizens against austerity. Similar protests have sparked revolutions – the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia (1989) and the Purple Revolution in Iraq (2005). These are public spheres that are of interest to adult educators (Fleming, 2023). Of course, we want to distinguish these protests from the reactionary, racist, homophobic interests in society. A proclamation by the protesters stated: ‘They thought we were asleep...But they were wrong’ (see Pellicer, et al., 2021). Public protests are profound democratic events in which protesters fill public squares with their voices and the public sphere with their experience. They intend bringing about policy and political change. A vibrant public sphere is essential for democracy. Street protests are a form of politics from below in which the experience of workers, or students, or other citizens is expressed in the form of critique. Their experiences are a counter epistemology, the protests a counter public to that of dominant interests. The epistemologically marginalized (those who in the opinion of the powerful may not know all the facts or understand the context) attempt to trigger a crisis in the knowledge of the socially and economically powerful in society. Transformative learning points to such crises as potential disorienting dilemmas for society.

Usually, transformative learning (TL) refers to crises or dilemmas as being within individual experience, but in these public moments of protest, the dilemma is a social, political or economic one: Whether old frames of reference will remain in command or whether new ones emerge based on the critiques and experience of protesting citizens.

Migrants also challenge the dominant self-understanding of individuals, groups and indeed entire nations - including the European Union (see Fassin & Honneth, 2022). Climate change is also a contest between those who have knowledge about an approaching crisis and those who wish to move on, or at least continue with business as usual. Arendt (1968), who provides a thread through this argument, calls attention to this phenomenon in the Nazi experience before the crisis is visible, and before it can be predicted, and:

*Until the very moment when catastrophe overtook everything and everybody, it was covered up not by realities but by the highly efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives who, without interruption and in many ingenious variations, explain away unpleasant facts and justified concerns. (p. viii)*

Now there is an increased threat from far-right political movements that embrace fascism, racism, conspiracy theories that often express uncomplicated perspectives. Minorities are identified

as a problem. Conspiracy theories, are deviant forms of critique, that involve suspicion of, as well as rejection of authority. They have complex meanings that give ambiguous signals (Fassin & Honneth, 2022), partly because they may be built on or include elements of truth that make responding to them more complex.

## THE PLAN

The task here is to outline a critical understanding of the current situation in which we find ourselves and weave the beginnings of an educational response. These are themes of this task:

- The age of experience;
- The public sphere, its decline as a support for democracy;
- Dewey on experience and education;
- Mezirow and transforming experience;
- Oskar Negt reconstructs experience as dialectical;
- Supporting transformative learning with a sociology of the imagination.

Adult education is a useful way of understanding the sources of current situations and identifying where there are, or may be, emancipatory counter tendencies (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023). I will turn to the contemporary adult educator and critical theorist Oskar Negt (1971, 2008; Negt & Kluge, 1993, 2016) and his collaborating co-author Alexander Kluge (2017, 2020; Kluge & Negt 2014). But first a note on what I consider to be a defining characteristic of this age. Never before has human experience, its expression and acceptance been so central to how society is understood (Fleming, 2020). The ideas of Hannah Arendt form a thread through this paper. Her experiences of Nazi Europe and of statelessness inform the voice with which she thinks through the dangers of fascism and provides a social theory of authoritarianism. Her insights (e.g., banality of evil) and her social theory have been revived recently and she remains a perceptive voice on freedom, and identifying the forces that are shaping the world today.

## THE AGE OF EXPERIENCE

Hannah Arendt (2018) held that rigorous thinking should be grounded in lived experience – in her case it was her experience of being a Jew in Europe, arriving in New York as a stateless person:

*No matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which at least for ourselves, contain in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say. Thought itself...arises out of the actuality of incidents, and incidents of lived experience must remain its guideposts by which thinking soars, or into the depths to which it descends. (p. 200)*

Fiction writing has a long history of articulating human experience and holding up realities for examination and even entertainment, commencing with one of the earliest English novels, *Pamela* in 1740 (Richardson, 2008). From this to the more recent *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, (1987) there is a tradition of novels exploring particular experiences in depth. James Joyce (Ellmann, 1982, p. 505) understood the importance of exploring the particular, saying, 'If I can get to the heart of Dublin, I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal'.

Atwood's book is a tale of subjugated women in a patriarchal society, loss of female agency and individuality, suppression of women's reproductive rights, and the various means by which women

resist and try to achieve individuality and independence. This futuristic dystopian narrative both expresses the concerns, fears and interests of women and in turn shapes women's lives and supports the imagining of new possibilities. As a story of state sponsored female oppression *The Handmaid's Tale* is a superb example of how the experience of people is told back to them and in turn the reaction alters the social situation – a dialectical relationship between fact and fiction. We will take up this insight again but for now it is clear that novels contribute to public debates in the public realm whose function it is, writes Arendt, (1968):

*To throw light on the affairs of men [sic] by providing a space of appearance in which they can show in deed and word, for better or worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by 'credibility gaps' and 'invisible government' by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding all truths, degrade all truth in meaningless triviality. (p. viii)*

## THE PUBLIC SPHERE

For most people new social media act as the public sphere in the world today. Negt and Kluge (2016) argue that the concentrated ownership of mass media, the manipulation by state and corporate actors of the media, undermine the public sphere as a space for critical dialogue and the expression of experience. It has become the product of the culture industry based on consumption and entertainment. A vibrant public sphere is the bedrock of an active democratic society and adult education is understood by some as having a powerful role in developing 'communities of publics' that engage in public opinion-forming processes (Rasmussen, 2021, p. 15). While not ignoring the essential and early work of Habermas (1974) in *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, we can clearly see it has changed significantly since 1974. According to Habermas (2022), today it is a digital, commodified and globalized space. To a striking degree there is a resulting commodification, individualization, and trivialization of social experience. Democracy cannot survive in the current digital world without an inclusive public sphere and a deliberative process for the formation of public opinion. Adult education is interested in the public sphere.

Idealistically, in the public sphere, free conversations of citizens take place under no duress or intimidation and ensure that the expressed views, interests and needs get taken up by governments. Conversely, the legitimacy of governments depends on the extent to which they can co-exist with free open debate and whether governments implement the emerging needs as policies. The public sphere makes political freedom real and 'the rights to vote, to assemble and to form associations' are concrete expressions of this freedom (Honneth, 2014: 259). The public sphere enables people to recognize the equal importance of each citizen. But media are often involved in reducing public discussions through controlling debates and being too closely allied with political interests and the interests of owners. The public sphere today is colonized and deeply compromised.

However, the public sphere remains an aspiration, and involves an ideal view of democracy. In the real world, not everybody is equal. Gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ability and education attainment continue to divide. Negt and Kluge (1993) sharply critique Habermas because he neglects to identify the differences between the ideal version of the public sphere and how it is experienced in the real world.

Many groups are excluded from the public sphere and as a result the public sphere itself is a contradiction. Nancy Fraser eloquently critiques women's exclusion and confinement to the private sphere of the family. This has led to the formation of 'subaltern' or 'counter publics' (Fraser, 1992, pp. 116, 123) that are parallel discursive spaces providing oppositional interpretations of people's needs, interests and identities. Movements for climate change, disability rights and LGBTQ+ recognition are also counter publics.

If one is denied access to public spaces these exclusions function, according to Honneth (1995), as misrecognitions that undermine individual self-worth, and social inclusion (Fleming, 2022b). These are examples of how political and social activities impact on individual identity. The political is personal (Honneth, 1995). Some of the ideas expressed here are not new and the connection between the personal and political has informed the music and writing of Bruce Springsteen, who wrote: ‘Dylan had deftly melded the political and personal in a way that added resonance and power to both. I agreed the political is personal and vice versa’ (Springsteen, 2016, p. 327). New inclusions in the public sphere (such as LGBTQ+), through public policies and legislation, increase social solidarity, and enhance individual identity. Recognition in the public sphere, in democracy and in education contribute to human development.

Television as a possible public sphere that claims to act in the public interest. However, the pre-packed amalgam of information, entertainment and education provided by television and its technologies is presented to viewers as a manufactured system that Hansen, in her introduction to Negt and Kluge (1993: xxiv), calls the ‘industrialization of consciousness’. Negt and Kluge state that ‘the real interests and needs which people would be prepared to fight for in a serious way play no role in this organization’ (1993, p. 101). There is a challenge to the sustained development of public spaces in which the real needs of citizens can be articulated. There is what Splichal (2022, p. 211) calls the ‘banalization of the public sphere’.

## EDUCATORS TURN TO DEWEY

A democratic society has the responsibility to improve the ‘methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion’ (Dewey, 1927, p. 208) through education, in order to overcome what he calls ‘prejudice, bias, misrepresentation and propaganda’ (1927, p. 212). The development of the public sphere thus begins to look important and indeed essential for our society. This is consistent with Dewey’s belief that education has a mandate to assist every citizen reach their ‘full stature’ (Dewey, 1922, p. 286) – their full potential. Critical understandings of the public sphere need to be taught, especially with regard to social media, at all levels of the education system.

We accept, with Dewey, that citizens play an important role in making public decisions, even if accessing the required knowledge and taking part in a compromised public sphere are challenging. Dewey thought that knowledge could not exist without community (Dewey, 1922; Lippmann, 1922). The key for Dewey is the development of communities that are well organized and in a position to tap into collective strengths (see also Freire, 1972). We suspect this is what Dewey meant by asserting: ‘the outstanding problem of the public is discovery and identification of itself’ (1922: 185). He also asserted that ‘a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience’ (1966, p. 91). This gives education a shared purpose with democracy and a link with experience. Education might accept responsibility to train all citizens so that all sectors of society would be able to join in a public sphere informed by critical and well-informed conversations and a rich imaginative pursuit of knowledge.

Democracy demands a more thoroughgoing education of citizens because it is both necessary and difficult to achieve. The enterprise of democracy is challenging. John Dewey is a useful ally when educators approach experience. He advocated that schools provide age-appropriate practices of democracy as part of the curriculum, and these experiences should be about issues of interest both in the school and ‘beyond’ (Dewey, 1933, p. 55). This would connect schools with the public sphere and teaching how to engage in critical conversations.

Transformative learning takes on board much of Dewey’s insights on critique, on reflection and forefronts the experience of adults as the trigger for learning. The role of education is to teach people to think in response to experiences of ‘perplexity’ (Dewey, 1933, p.22). Perplexity is like the problem posing of Freire. This very Socratic idea of life experience producing perplexity, and

education inculcating a psychological restlessness (curiosity) is in keeping with an interest in asking questions as against providing students with answers. The 'demand for the solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection,' according to Dewey (1933, p. 24). When a 'perplexity lays hold of a mind ... that mind is alert and enquiring because [it is] stimulated from within' (Dewey, 1933, p. 207). The critical mind always remains uncertain, able to doubt and embraces partial solutions that may or must suffice for now - even as the mind experiences an 'emotional disturbance' (Dewey, 1933, p. 24).

The world view we acquire in school, at home and from our culture provides answers, values, attitudes and the process of re-thinking everything we inherit is the very definition of adult learning, or more accurately transformative learning. Critical thinking involves engaging with our experience of the world we inherit. The educational task for each individual is to engage in problematizing (Freire, 1972) what we have until that moment taken for granted. Teachers facilitate this process. The threats to thinking and democracy from the fundamentalism of the far right ultimately lead to prohibiting public expressions of the experiences of citizens - look at any authoritarian government. The work of artists and poets is particularly threatening to them. To allow the expression of experience is the first step towards a vibrant public sphere, democracy, and transformative learning.

Critical reflection, Freire argues (1972), requires that we learn to read the world in order to understand how personal and shared experiences have been shaped by power and to perceive that internal oppressions and external injustices operate dialectically (Freire, 1972). Democratic citizenship involves critically understanding the causes of inequality and engaging in small, and large-scale, actions that change the way power in society is exercised and thus reduce unnecessary suffering and enhance the possibilities of becoming more human. This is a critical 'reconstruction of experience' - as Dewey (1966) defines education - and more importantly the reconstruction and transformation of oppression, inequality, exclusion, and misrecognitions.

Dewey (1966) defines education more completely as 'that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience' (p. 76). It includes 'organizing, restructuring and transforming' experience (p. 50). For Dewey experience is in continuity with previous experience and in interaction with one's broader environment. In pursuing meaning (learning) we modify or integrate new experience with previous experiences. For Mezirow (1978) 'a meaning perspective refers to the structure of cultural assumptions within which one's new experience is assimilated to - and transformed by - one's past experience' (p. 101). Experience is created by interacting with the environment (Dewey, 1963). Learning involves becoming aware of these continuities and interactions (Dewey, 1966) and how they too are themselves distorted processes and open to misinterpretation. Frames of reference help interpret experience and dysfunctional frames of reference distort experience.

I rely on Oskar Negt's critical theory and Mezirow's transformative learning for this understanding of experience. What is new in this following understanding of experience is the aspect mostly ignored by Dewey and by transformative learning theory - the dialectical nature of experience. Mezirow allowed the dialectical understanding of experience escape his attention. Experience is dialectical. This may have been a missed opportunity for Mezirow (and transformative learning theory) to grasp the full contextualized understanding of experience as outlined by Hegel, Paulo Freire and Oskar Negt.

## **FROM RECONSTRUCTING TO TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE**

Critical reflection is defined by Dewey as 'active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends' (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). Reflection also involves 'turning on some unconscious assumption and making it explicit' (Dewey, 1933, p. 281) and making a conscious and voluntary effort to establish beliefs upon a 'firm basis of evidence and rationality' (Dewey, 1933, p. 6). Mezirow suggests that

critical reflection is the way to engage with experience transformatively (Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow (1985) defines transformative learning as a critical process:

*Of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of our psychocultural assumptions has come to constrain the way in which we perceive our world, of reconstituting that structure in a way that allows us to be more inclusive and discriminating in our integrating of experience and to act on these new understandings. (p. 22)*

The kinds of discussions and conversations that lead to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1996) are open, free, egalitarian, inclusive and participatory and exactly the kinds of discourses that Habermas (1987) describes as communicative action. Discourse is a form of specialized dialogue that is involved in searching for a common understanding. But in order to be understood, there must be intelligible talk, it must be true, justified, sincere and without the intention to deceive (Mezirow, 1991, p. 65). For Mezirow an adult is one who is able to participate in these kinds of conversations. This critical reflection requires emotional maturity, empathy, awareness, an ability not to be adversarial in discussions and to think and hold different and contradictory thoughts at the same time. It emphasizes consensus building - even if consensus is not always possible to achieve (Mezirow, 2000). These requirements give transformation theory a solid theoretical grounding, and at a practical level for learners, a challenging target to achieve. These kinds of discussions are exactly the kinds of conversions that are demanded of active citizens in a functioning democracy and in a functioning public sphere. And this is how I connect transformative learning, democracy, and the public sphere (Fleming, 2023).

Adult education has been (and continues to be) largely focused on how to facilitate instrumental learning – now disguised in much educational discourse as lifelong learning (Fleming, 2021). This is one of the risks of adopting lifelong learning as a mantra or policy position, as it has a tendency to be used to refer to functional learning or work skills (Author, 2021). This critique of instrumental reason or learning should not be mistaken as a diminution of its importance, complexity or usefulness in society or in learning lives. The most persuasive distortion in education results, in Mezirow's view, from our 'assumption that all adult learning proceeds exactly as instrumental learning does' (Mezirow, 1985, p. 18). In previous publications I have mined the considerable works of Axel Honneth in order to develop these ideas (Fleming, 2022; Fleming, Kokkos, & Finnegan, 2019) and building on these I turn to Oskar Negt and his work on critical education.

## **OSKAR NEG: EXPERIENCE AS DIALECTICAL**

Oskar Negt's (Negt & Kluge, 1993) work, along with his collaborator Alexander Kluge, allows us to further elaborate the idea of transforming of experience. His iteration of critical theory identifies the adult education of workers as a way to eliminate injustices in work. The experience of workers gives an insight into and starting point for learning, teaching and his critical social theory (Kluge & Negt, 2014). The experience of workers (Kluge & Negt, 2014) is infused with the contradictions of capitalist society and these authors see experience as a source of 'resistance to capitalism' (p. 31). In Negt's education (exemplary learning) the experience of workers is analyzed, and by exercising their sociological imaginations, workers can come to understand more comprehensively the issues they experience and take social action to alter the condition of workers (and learners). I call this recognitive justice - asserting the rights of workers to be recognized. Negt, borrowing from Hegel, refers to the connection between current experiences and past experiences as dialectical. Negt, in contrast to Dewey and Mezirow, states that these connections are dialectical. What does this mean?

Take the example of a team game or sport such as football. The game of football (soccer) is usually owned by an organization - such as FIFA - and enjoyed by players and fans. From time to time, either through the increased skills of players, or through the introduction of technologies to

enhance the accuracy of referee's decisions, the rules of the game may be changed. A good example is the way goalkeepers may or may not handle the ball following a deliberate back-pass from a player on their own team. In turn, the players and fans adapt and become accustomed to a different configuration of the game and their new experience. Players become more skilled, team tactics are adjusted and these changes are made as part of a dialectic relationship between the owners, the players and supporters. The game changes and becomes more responsive to previous experiences and the environment (economic, technical, TV, and skills of players) in which it operates. It evolves in the dialectic interactions between owners, players and supporters.

It is this understanding of dialectic that is almost totally neglected in adult education, lifelong learning and unfortunately in transformative learning. Today the complexity offered by taking seriously this dialectic is attractive because of its potential ability to address a number of problems in social theory and adult education. The connections between experiences and broader social and cultural contexts are dialectical. This is not to say that Dewey, Habermas and Honneth are unaware of this. But as transformation theory evolves and revisits past ideas and current contexts, we are constantly challenged to renew our familiarity with experience and its importance in learning. This takes us beyond Mezirow (Fleming, 2014, 2016, 2021).

So Negt reframes experience and says that the continuities with past experience are dialectical and the interactions with broader social environment are dialectical too. This has implications for transformative learning and fundamentally alters our understanding of transformative learning theory. The well-known stages of transformative learning also involve connecting one's individual experience with broader social issues. These connections are dialectical. The now familiar phases of transformative learning must now be reinterpreted. And questions about whether learning and making meaning are individual or social are capable of a different interpretation. The personal and social are dialectically connected. Anything else misunderstands experience – and its reconstruction or transformation.

Individual problems are also connected dialectically with broader social issues. The political is personal - dialectically. This makes understanding one's problems or dilemmas and the search for solutions more complex than previously understood and these problems are not properly understood unless they are seen as dialectical. Connecting one's experience (usually understood as an individual phenomenon) with broader social issues is not just an interesting add-on for educators and learners, but an essential dimension of understanding one's experiences. Indeed, without this dialectical dimension the connections are mis-construed. The action one takes as the essential final phase of transformative learning is a dialectically interconnected set of actions at personal and social levels. Praxis is dialectical (Fleming, 2022a).

Negt, more than any other critical theorist associated with the Frankfurt School, builds an education theory around these ideas. Even if learners are not aware of these connections, real understandings of experience are only fully revealed when they are interpreted as dialectic (Fleming, 2022a). I now reframe Mezirow's transformation of frames of reference as a pedagogy of transforming experience - dialectically.

## **TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF SOCIAL IMAGINATION: TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE THAT IS DIALECTICAL**

This exploration of experience involves exercising one's sociological imagination. The education question asks: How can we teach students to develop a sociological imagination? In addressing this I rely on the insights most often associated with C Wright Mills (1959) and Negt and Kluge (Fleming, 2022c). My response is to outline a number of borrowed ingredients from their work and develop a *Pedagogy of Social Imagination*.

When writing about refugees, Arendt, who was herself stateless having fled Europe, claimed that she had lost everything – homes, occupations and language – and identity. The 2014 Nobel Laureate,



Patrick Modiano (1999), captures this loss of identity by many of the characters whose fictional lives unfold in his novels such as *Dora Bruder*. As Arendt states 'the comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest members to be excluded and persecuted' (Arendt, 2007, p. 274). One of her major contributions to understanding that experience was her account of the Eichmann trials. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt (1965) explains what she meant by 'banality of evil' and relates it to a crisis of imagination. By bringing a sociological imagination to bear on experience and informing education with it we can help learners remain awake in spite of the risks of being found asleep – as the protested declared in Barcelona. Writing about Eichmann, Arendt (1965) states that Eichmann lacked the imagination to see the reality he created from the perspective of other people. This is part of the banality of evil (Arendt, 1965). It was his inability to think that informed Eichmann. 'He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*' (1965, p. 287). It was precisely a lack of imagination which enabled Eichmann to sit for months through interrogations and though he was not stupid it was 'sheer thoughtlessness', according to Arendt (1971, p. 288), an inability to think (p. 417), that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of his age. To teach how to think, see things from the perspective of another and to imagine is a worthwhile part of a transforming curriculum – an imperative on the transformative journey.

Exercising sociological imagination involves being wide-awake, and this is well described by Alfred Schutz (1967):

*By the term 'wide-awakeness' we want to denote a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements. Only the performing and especially the working self is fully interested in life and, hence, wide-awake.... This attention is an active, not a passive one. Passive attention is the opposite to full awareness. (p. 213)*

Teaching for transformative learning can prompt learners to engage in the real dilemmas that confront our societies today - as so many refugees flee from terror. Such wide-awakeness involves paying attention to life and what is going on around one and in particular being able to exercise one's imagination. It involves thinking critically and engaging in a critical way with the arts and how they are experienced.

Imagination is the key ingredient in what I am proposing as an educational response to the issues raised in this paper, including the social media. It involves being wide awake and in empathy with others. Imagination makes empathy possible and we teach students to resist thinking that lacks empathy and feelings and also teach them to resist the monopoly of technical thinking. We help students to imagine moving beyond familiar ways of understanding the world. To look at art, at Picasso's *Guernica*, for instance, and see the broken weeping women with dead babies and become aware of the tragic experiences of yesterday's mothers and the mothers of today. If we can imagine this with Picasso, we can also imagine Ukraine today or the boat people. We can then increase the ability to imagine a better world – in which there will be no more wars that make women scream and weep like that – no bombs, no dead children. To open eyes and ears and imagination to art will enable us to pick up the signals deep within us as individuals and a community that know that a better world is possible (Greene, 1995).

Imagination, as Dewey said, helps us break through the 'inertia of habit' and of habitual thinking (Dewey, 1934, p. 272). He proposed teaching for such break-through moments. Or as Picasso (Malraux, 1974) said about painting:

*You have to wake people up. To revolutionise their way of identifying things. You've got to create images they won't accept...Force them to understand that they're living in a pretty queer world. A world that is not reassuring. A world that's not what they think it is. (p. 110)*

Even in Europe torn asunder by the Second World War Käthe Kollwitz (2022) was able to draw, paint and sculpt images of closeness, care and tenderness. There is no critical reflection without imagination and the first involves empathy, the latter leads to empathy.

I suggest there is a crisis of imagination in the education system with its preoccupations with instrumental learning, economically useful learning and managerialism agendas. We can see the limits imposed by that system (Aronowitz & Bratsis, 2005) and break through the dark imaginings. Imagination is needed to break from what we take for granted – the project of transformation. In contrast to most of the literature on transformative learning with its much-criticized focus on critical reflection, it is imagination that is the grounds for transformation. For Arendt (1978, p. 2) imagination involved training the mind ‘visit the imaginations of others’.

On more familiar ground for adult educators, we recall with Freire (2004) that imagination allows people stand on the edge of society and to think beyond the ways that power is exercised now and to at least begin to experience ourselves and ‘know ourselves as more, much more than pawns in a game where the rules are already set’ (p. 109).

This requires, I think, an integrated theory of critical reflection on experience, and a democracy that seeks to tackle inequality, exclusions, and misrecognition, being mindful of the dynamics of capitalism and alert to the extraordinary nature of human capacities. I suggest that Dewey (1937), Freire, Mezirow, Negt, and Kluge offer useful way points for such a theory – a theory that will introduce and induce perplexity, curiosity, thinking, critical reflection and lead students to wide-awakeness, to imagine and become active agents of personal and social transformation.

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