

Book Review

Journal of Transformative Education
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–8

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Formenti L. & West L. (2018). *Transforming perspectives in lifelong learning and adult education: A dialogue*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; 323 pp.

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DOI: 10.1177/15413446231180238

The review of a book is a thoughtful mission. I believe that along with translation, to review a book is a profound learning process that forces you not only to read very carefully but also to strive to understand the epistemological position of the author(s) and thus to visualize the meaning behind the words that are employed to express unique and often complex ideas. Thus, the text of a review resembles the rigid articulated theoretical texts that we often read in scientific papers or in the theoretical frameworks of dissertations. This image is perfectly suitable for books that more or less resemble the classical structure of academic texts. But what happens when a book follows a completely different structure? How does a reader/reviewer handle a book whose structure is biographical, whose form is dialogical and which is grounded in a logic of a spiritual pilgrimage? These questions came to my mind as I started my effort to review the awarded book *Transforming Perspectives in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education: a dialogue*, by Laura Formenti and Linden West.

As I was struggling to determine my reviewing and writing strategy, I had an idea: Why shouldn't I follow a similar path to the one that Formenti and West have taken? Why not present the book and comment on its contents through a narrative that reflects my reactions as I discuss with the text itself? I thought that this idea could probably help me to express more authentically my point of view in relation to the content of the book, namely the concept of transformation in adult education and lifelong learning. Therefore, I started reading the book and started making notes in the same way that I would have taken notes in a live conversation with its authors. At this point, I must confess that I did not start this journey from a completely neutral position towards the authors who are the main actors and companions in this enquiry. I know both authors quite well and hold them in high regard. I have met both of them many years ago, I have read many of their papers and I had the privilege to discuss with both of them their ideas on several occasions. At the same time, I have to admit that I always considered reading and

analyzing their work a challenging task since at least for my understanding, the discourse employed in the works of both these prolific authors is usually dense and intricate. Having stated the biases and limitations of my review, in the sections below, I will present my views, feelings and understandings of the content of this very interesting book.

Transformation is to my opinion the final expected learning outcome in most if not all educational endeavours. It is well known that most of the great scholars of our field (e.g. Paulo Freire, Peter Jarvis, Jack Mezirow, Knud Illeris and others) argue for an education that fosters learning processes that could eventually lead to individual and social transformation. In an adventurous and metaphorical spirit, I believe that transformation is the 'Holy Grail' of adult education. The demand for transformation has been an issue of concern to the adult education community from the dawn of the field's existence regardless of whether we perceive transformation as a social goal or as an individual achievement, and irrespective of whether we acknowledge it publicly or discuss it only with our colleagues or even just with ourselves. But why is the demand becoming more felt and the need to come out openly and express our anxiety for transformation seems greater in our era? In their book, West and Formenti offer us a particularly satisfying justification. Drawing on the thoughts of Bauman and Bateson and by bringing forward examples from their own personal biography, in the first chapters (1 and 2) they make us realize in a careful way, the spiritual and material impasse that our society is immersed in. In this new global landscape of disconnection, the new normalcy that they describe has novel characteristics, since as they argue there is no longer any sense of or any space for stability. In our era:

Entry into the globalized society is open to anyone with their own stance and ability to fund it, or aspiration to a different lifestyle, like travellers in the old-fashioned caravanserais. The result is a new normative, nomadic mindset which emphasises movement rather than staying-on; everything is always provisional, in lieu of permanent (or 'solid') commitment. People can be led astray, trapped in a prison of perpetual movement, in search of new stimulation. We can all be discontented nomads now.

(Formenti & West, 2018, p. 42)

To my understanding, the afore described social context of perpetual noetic movement and continuous quest for acceptance/inclusion has as a consequence the separation of the person from the spiritual dimension of human existence. This realization becomes shocking especially since, as the authors proclaim, spirituality goes beyond the boundaries of religion and concerns 'the awareness and capacity to honour interconnectedness and mystery in life; and [a] movement toward greater authenticity or to a more authentic self' (p. 24). This situation is a new kind of dehumanizing oppression that shares similar characteristics with what Paulo Freire described almost 50 years ago. But what makes our oppression more fearful is that this dehumanizing

process of our existence is reinforced by the ‘sanitization and anaesthetization’ of research, the ascetic fragmentation of scientific disciplines and ‘the denial or suspicion of subjectivity’ that as the authors assert ‘stifles’ the intellectual and educational imagination and promotes the separation of mind, body and emotions (p. 16). The analysis offered by Formenti and West in the first chapters helps us to recognize something that we either quietly or sometimes with a louder voice discuss in the adult educators’ community: that the traditional framework of adult education has more or less collapsed. I understand that this statement is strong. But I have to acknowledge that it has to be strong since this is the only way that this message may become an awakening call or a disorienting dilemma for adult educators.

The adult education project that aimed to promote social justice, citizenship and collective self-improvement seems to have lost the rear-guard battle against the forces of the market. Advanced capitalism and neoliberalism have imposed a new mantra of ‘competitive and individualistic survival’ (p. 37) that has affected even the sacred notion of good teaching. Although, we have been warned for this situation by other authors (e.g. Peter Jarvis, Ted Fleming and others), reading the same message in the narrative words of West and Formenti is like facing the second yellow card in a football (soccer) game. As I think more about it, they are right. Teaching is not anymore about self-awareness and spiritual completion. As they state it seems that in our era ‘good teaching – and the deep, slow, reflexive digestion of experience and mediated knowledge – is often replaced by teaching to tests or the supplier/consumer metaphor’ (p. 48). At this point, I believe that the reader of the book is expecting some additional – brief analysis of the forces of modern society that have weakened the transformative strength of adult education and made it an institution that most of the time reproduces or conforms with the demands of our liquid economic and social life. Even though the choice of the authors is not to dig deeper into these forces, the main message of this section of the book is clear: adult learning in our era is rapidly becoming a matter of skills, qualifications and certifications.

However, Formenti and West are not pessimistic despite the fact that our learning, our existential process of becoming, is constantly threatened by various political and corporate agendas. They suggest that there is a chance to revive our dream as long as we engage in learning processes where we acknowledge our contribution to the construction of this fluid and hybrid personal and social impasse:

Survival is constantly threatened by startling forces with the power to turn everything upside down or drown us in an economic and cultural tsunami. But we can learn, with others, to survive the monstrous aggressions of the world, and to take care of ourselves and our planet’s fragilities. Especially when we recognise, perhaps, that many of the ‘aggressions’ and some of the care-less-ness is of our own making.

(Formenti & West, 2018, p. 52)

At this point, a new discussion concerning transformation theory and transformative learning processes follows. Here I should note that although the book is structured to be read in a linear fashion, I personally find that this choice is subverted by the reflective style of the book. As I was reading it, I had to go back through the chapters several times to better substantiate my thoughts. But let's return to the question of transformation which is the essence of the book.

Transformation theory is considered one of the most important attempts and perhaps the most comprehensive approach to the ongoing struggle to justify and explain learning processes in adulthood. Mezirow's transformative learning theory discussed a learning process that through a structured, cognitive and rational process, in which we are given the opportunity to acknowledge and critically evaluate the foundations of our meaning making process, we have the opportunity to transform ourselves by enriching our frames of reference with novel perspectives and understandings. However, this process and its concomitant learning outcome – the desired transformation – as Formenti and West point out cannot consist only of rational cognitive processes of reflection. As they remind us, the cognitive dimension is only one of the processes involved in the concept of transformation: 'The word transformation might suggest an inner, deeper, psychic change or soul work; and of changed relationships to self, others and otherness, including cognition' (p. 64). This insight provides the platform on which the authors are grounded to examine a number of dimensions of transformation theory in the next chapters (3 and 4).

The third chapter is of special interest. In it, the concept of perspective is examined and analyzed in a salient way. In this analysis, the linearity of perspective is highlighted, a dimension that accounts for why we have become comfortable with the linear stories of our lives and their intrinsic meanings. In this sense, as teachers, it seems that we accept, process and discuss the stories (and their meanings) of our learners. The rather challenging discussion that develops in this chapter is not reassuring since the authors actually validate some well-known fears about the rational transformative learning processes. Transformative learning for Formenti and West cannot be limited to a structured dialogical rational and well-thought-out process. For them, it has to be expanded to become a 'contextual, auto/biographical, psychic, relational, narrative, conflictual and even transcendental' process (p. 72). Someone may claim that this statement is not entirely novel since other authors (e.g. John Dirkx) have supported similar theses. However, the dialogical way that the authors employ to build their case not only supports all previous similar views but in addition it makes these views even more powerful.

At this point, in Chapter 4, the authors are responding to the apparent need of the reader for further explanation through an interesting analysis of critical learning which contains intensely relational and loving learning processes. Critical thinking and critical reflection are at the heart of transformative learning and many scholars have devoted time to clarify this concept. Formenti and West add their view and assist us to further understand and clarify this much-interpreted concept. On the one hand, they present expressively the views of thinkers are considered iconic to

critical education (e.g. Brookfield and Honneth) but even more through a stimulating presentation of the transformative journey of a learner (Matthew) and a metalogue on Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' they bring out with elegance that the rational criticality advocated by the classical transformative learning theory seems rather unidimensional. The obvious consequence of this unidimensional notion of criticality is that the learning process of transformation is usually perceived in a 'auto/biographically "light" and reductive way' in relation to the learner experience and distanced from 'suffering, struggles, doubts and even the pain of lives' (p. 105) of those who try to sacrifice elements of their identity to learn and change. It is like denying all the aromas and textures that exist in the complex process of transformation because it is simply hard to distinguish them.

After the previous observation, transformative learning processes seem to have a great affinity with the process of psychotherapy. Certainly, the psychotherapeutic dimension was always evident in Mezirow's work. After all, he himself had admitted the influence that Roger Gould's approach had on his thinking. But here in Chapter 5, we have a different analysis of this given eclectic affinity. Here, the authors present us with the psychoanalytic dimension of the transformative learning process. They claim that transformation requires internal dialogue with our frame of reference and a reconciliation with its complexity. In this fascinating discussion that predictably involves the ideas of Freud, Jung and Winnicott, the authors emphasize the dimension of empirical learning that seems to be a point where the practice of transformative learning meets the practice of psychoanalysis and that meeting point is learning from experience:

The distinction between learning from, rather than learning about experience is useful. 'Learning from' has to do with a deeper, more engaged, and integrated level of experience, a fulsome emotional, sensorial, cognitive, spiritual, and heart-felt encounter with an object of knowledge, like a piece of writing, or art, a metaphor, or an idea.

(Formenti & West, 2018, p. 112)

Indeed, this meeting point and a number of other common elements help us to understand that the psychoanalytic perspective can greatly enrich the practice of transformation theory in adult education, although we should note that there are clear boundaries that separate a psychoanalytic therapeutic process from a learning process in the context of adult education. Having said that I recognize that every learning process has therapeutic dimensions and obviously the reverse is also true. But transformative learning and critical reflection are not limited to the rational examination of dysfunctional assumptions. Formenti and West are clear: 'a changing frame of reference is infused with largely unconscious psychic forces that are neglected in conventional critical reflection processes' (p. 150). For me, this sentence is crucial because it gives another dimension to transformative educational practice. The truth is that trying to meet curriculum goals, learning outcomes and skills accreditation

processes often prevents us from seeing the deeper process required to make the transformation we seek possible. Our perspective on teaching has to be enriched and together with it maybe we should alter the way we see the learning communities we are facilitating. These communities should probably be seen as ‘spaces for educational improvement, using soul work as a force towards integration, solidarity, mutual recognition and a spirit of fraternity or sorority’ (p. 143).

In the next chapters (6 and 7) of the book, the authors lead us down to more difficult trails. Important questions concerning consciousness and awareness as well as embodied learning are analyzed in an open way, in the sense that the authors recognize the difficulty, complexity and utopian dimension of trying to promote a deeply reflective and relational process of transformation through learning processes that are most often designed to serve a neoliberal and consumerist agenda. Such an undertaking seems impossible, and at this point, the authors remind us, in Chapter 8, the roots of adult education in social movements, popular education and community education.

Chapter 8 is revealing because it is here that the authors expose the roots of their predispositions regarding adult education. Popular education around the world, whether based on the collaboration between universities and trade unions (as in Northern Europe) or rooted in Catholicism and Marxism (Italy) or in an eclectic reading of Marxism (as in Greece, for example), has served and continues to serve, at least in those places where neoliberal ideology has not yet succeeded in dismantling it, a particular purpose. A purpose that is strongly supported by the ideas of humanist philosophers (e.g. Freire, Buber and Gramsci). Formenti and West, in this book, remind us that adult education is about :

... liberating people from ignorance and sustaining their capacity to think, feel, to be critical and discriminating, and to fight for social justice. It is also about claiming dignity and building mutual recognition: so, we might need new, or reinvigorated forms of adult education beyond capitalism’s human resource perspective.

(Formenti & West, 2018, p. 183)

Great figures of popular education such as Danilo Dolci, Raymond Williams and Richard Henry Tawney appear in the discussion and narratives of this chapter. In reading what is described about the work of these iconic figures, I felt gratified by Formenti and West’s choice to bring to the fore people who I fear are gradually being neglected from the references and sources of the texts we read in scholarly journals and conference proceedings. For those who are not familiar with the monumental work of these men, reading this chapter will be an occasion for a deeper dive into the work of these pioneers of adult education. Although this chapter does not provide a comparative analysis of popular education movements in the strict terms of comparative methodology, the authors discover some common findings that are truly inspirational:

We have also noticed common themes across popular education in our different analyses. Of the temptation to violence but also strong resistance to it, in non-violent social movements. We have observed tensions around knowledge, the role of rationality, and the silenced need for imagination and creativity, and to acknowledge messiness, and maybe the case for good enough praxis, rather than the dangerous idea of the perfect perspective in the theory and practice of transformation. We have witnessed strong spiritual and even religious influences and the importance of seeing the divine in the other, and of adult education as the Kingdom socially incarnate. There is emphasis given to the sacred in the earth, in all her splendor and frailty.

(Formenti & West, 2018, p. 213)

I have the feeling that in this paragraph one can encounter the interconnections and interdependencies between the rational and the transcendental, between the realistic and the utopian, as well as the importance of recognizing the other in any learning process that ultimately has as its ideal goal the creation of a better world. But how can a learning process respond to all these interconnections and explicit and implicit cognitive and meta-cognitive conflicts, to the construction of knowledge and ultimately to a deeper awareness of ourselves and our relationships with others, so that steps of transformation can be taken? For Formenti and West, what is needed is the introduction of aesthetic experiences in the learning processes. As they state:

The encounter with the world entails an ongoing physical/emotional positioning, where our action finds resistance, and beauty can be the unexpected reward of an interaction: an unpretentious wildflower, a crack in the wall, a wrinkly face can move us to tears, if we are present and alive. It is the biological and psychological foundation of the human condition.

(Formenti & West, 2018, p. 228).

Again, utilizing personal narrative and the work of Rene Magritte, and through the intense analysis of their thoughts, the authors in Chapter 9 allow us to recognize that art enables us to expand our stories beyond the boundaries of the premises on which we have constructed them and to continue the search for new foundations and representations. But as we are wisely warned, transformation does not result from seeing works of art or reflecting on them, but from a continuous cycle (a spiral) of personal exploration that is initiated by our encounter with a work of art, through the dialogue provoked by its different perspectives, through the critical thinking that develops in response to the critical gaze of the artist, and ultimately the soul work that results from this whole process.

Reading the last chapters of Formenti and West's book, I realized that this reading journey is not an effortless task. It requires commitment, concentration, inner dialogue and self-reflection. The authors, for some deeper reason that they themselves probably know best, have engaged in a dialogical journey of discovery, revelation and self-discovery that they consider a pilgrimage. But this is not a common pilgrimage. In this

journey, which is usually a solitary or a project for a limited number of invitees, Formenti and West are kind enough to open their hearts and allow us not just to follow their journey but to participate in it since questions and dilemmas inevitably arise from this convergence. Formenti and West, as adult educators, and psychotherapists, present us in an interesting way 'that the marginalization of the spiritual and transcendent, as well as the idea of the sacred, from discourses of adult education and transformation, leaves a troubling vacuum' (p. 241). They help us understand that transformative learning processes are complex and deeply spiritual processes in which rationality and extra-rationality necessarily coexist and coevolve. They lead us beyond the sterile Western individualistic conception of transformative learning towards a more profound perception of the concept of learning a notion that requires the reorganization of our relationship with ourselves and others. This outstanding read is more than just another book on transformative learning. It is a fountain of knowledge and understanding that both challenges and interconnects our epistemology and the process of our becoming; a text that challenges the narrative of separation and binary thinking and highlights the importance of dependence, reconnection and subjectivity.

I am not entirely sure if I would have attempted to study in such detail this book if it weren't for the challenge to write a review. Now that I have, however, I think I have stood lucky. It is a book that, in my opinion, completes a timeless discussion of the transformative potential of learning in adulthood, and which is probably an opportunity for and an intellectual adventure to critical self-reflection for adult educators that embrace transformation in their practice.

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