



May 2021

Educator, Educate Thyself

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

Frank Fischer and Alan Mandell

Stephen Sterling does a first-rate job of [outlining](#) the myriad issues of learning confronting a sustainable transition. The question of why the reimagination of education is so neglected is as curious as it is worrisome. It is indeed the case that the barriers Sterling outlines are important factors: the emphasis on neoliberal beliefs and values, class inequalities, cultural divisions, the limitations of formal schooling at every level, the lack of a clear vision of a truly sustainable society, and more. While Sterling is surely aware that education alone cannot solve the ecological crisis, thinking clearly and deeply about the process of social learning is a necessary condition for the possibility of building a movement to confront the urgent problems we face.

Not only do teachers narrowly seek to prepare students for jobs in an unsustainable economy, but most educators also continue to practice what Paulo Freire called the “banking model” of education. In this model, teachers seek to fill students’ minds as “empty vessels,” with the content of their expert narratives about which learners are presumed to be either ignorant or misinformed. Students are reduced to passivity, taking notes and regurgitating what they think the teacher wants to read on examinations. The system of schooling serves to socialize students into the sort of hierarchical world they will later enter, but their learning is largely rote and bears little relationship to their daily lives.

A good deal of what we know about these limitations comes from progressive educators who have engaged in many educational change movements over many decades. One of these efforts has been the “transformational learning” movement, initiated and guided by the work of the late Jack Mezirow.¹ Following the lead of Mezirow and of educator-activists such as Paulo Freire, the scholars

of transformative learning stress the importance of combining content and experience with critical reflection throughout the process.²

Turning to experiential learning is demanding and requires a dramatic restructuring not only of the curriculum, but of our understanding of knowledge. Learning outside of the classroom is, to be sure, a foundation for transformative learning, but it only goes so far. Such a turn involves a rethinking of the role of the teacher, an active facilitative role concerned with asking critical questions and of integrating appropriate real-world experiences into new learning.

Fundamental to such a reorientation is a reflexive examination of the basic assumptions informing any belief system.³ Teachers and students are called to collaborate to understand this neoliberal world and the ways it leads to unsustainability. In doing so, they can, together, begin to critically assess the meaning of a phenomenon such as ecological crisis by interrogating its relationship to the larger patterns of which it is a part, whether situations, a social system, or an ideology and its cultural values.

Often, this process requires critical reflection on “distorted” premises supporting one’s narrative understandings and expectations related, for example, to the human relationship to nature. Given the embeddedness of underlying meanings basic to the very core of self-definitions—related to consumerism, for instance—and the socio-cultural values to which they relate, whether of an individual or a group, such reflection often encounters resistance, including deeply felt attitudes and emotions that support ties to an unsustainable situation, the contours of which are largely taken for granted.

Taking a broader view, it is important to also recognize that this transformative learning process follows a set of steps. The first step involves a “narrative dialogue” that tells a story or describes an action, for example, the coming ecological crisis. This “problematization” of the story affirms or reaffirms a subjective and objective reality that makes a given socio-ecological lifeworld otherwise seem self-evident and normal. Thus, this step could involve thinking about devastating fires, destructive hurricanes, or rising water levels that destroyed one’s home. Here, seemingly settled issues about, for example, capitalist deregulation of key societal and environmental functions and the tug of a rugged, materially oriented, individualist worldview, can become unsettled and open to interrogation. No doubt, this part of the learning process, in turn, can lead to intellectual and emotional apprehensiveness, with new ideas appearing as sources of confusion and threats rather than opportunities.

In the second step, such a threatening situation turns into a “disorienting dilemma” and becomes the object of further exploration. The deliberative task is to identify the “manifest situational contradictions” of an unsustainable way of life. Here, for example, the “good life” presented by neoliberal capitalism can be re-understood as a vision of a system that is poisoning that very way of life. This recognition, then, gives rise to new dialogue about the ecological evidence and arguments and alternative courses of action, including a sustainable transition.

The third step seeks to develop a critical discourse that explores the relationship between the problematic situation and similar themes related to other environmental settings and possibilities for change. In this phase, learners are encouraged to perceive these problems and conflicts in the context of the larger socio-ecological framework of which they are a part and to develop reflective capacities to interpret the meanings of different perspectives, and, too, their implications for specific transitional changes and actions. Here, for instance, one could discuss whether it is better to follow Greta Thunberg to the barricades or wait for Bill Gates’ technological solutions. The result of this process is a new story that helps learners better understand the problematic situation with which we are confronted: how it came to be, and what to do about it.

Taken as a whole, in transformational learning, the teacher/facilitator strives to help the students describe and unravel the logic of their situation and the possibilities of transition through a discursive conversation that links the specific situation to the larger social and ecological structures that shape it. This requires open dialogue, a call to investigation and exploration, access to information, respect for others, and, overall, a safe space for “undistorted” discussion.

Indeed, one of the major challenges of this practice is how to deal with passion and emotional expression. More than just the rational exchange of ideas, the facilitation of transformational interactions involves a highly complex dialogue in which the identities of the individuals involved, the contextual setting of the education transaction, and the prevailing political climate affect the very nature and form of learning. It is particularly because passions are intricately interwoven in all these discussions, that the careful steps outlined above, are so important to recognize and carry out.

If transformational learning for a sustainable transition is to work, it must be facilitated and nurtured by people with high levels of personal awareness. In short, the educators first need to educate themselves. This involves a willingness of teachers to accept the tentativeness of their own

conclusions, with an interest in acknowledging and evaluating their own tacit assumptions, with a tolerance for ambiguities, a desire to listen to ideas and feelings often very different from what they know, and, overall, a genuine reflective spirit. This requires confronting the social, emotional, and intellectual distances that separate the teacher from the students' experiential life-worlds.

This new role of the educator-as-facilitator, as mentor, must be learned. The situation is made even more difficult by the fact that discussions dealing with social-ecological matters often move quickly toward ideological critique. Although clearly political, a commitment to transformational dialogue is not to be confused with a commitment to a specific ideology or environmental doctrine. The professional committed to guiding a deliberative process also needs to be committed, as in the case here, to eco-democratic values. The facilitation of transformative learning must follow ethical guidelines that themselves need to be articulated and agreed upon. At every turn, transformational educators must encourage learners to consider freely a wide range of viewpoints.

There is nothing simple about transformational learning for a sustainable transition. But we do have the tools to guide educators in developing a new model of teaching and social learning that is so critical to an incredibly important sustainable transition. Our challenge is not only to focus on the content of what we know and understand we need to know, but on the very process of communicating, debating, and experiencing democratic dialogue that needs to characterize any sustainable transition.

Endnotes

1. Jack Mezirow, ed., *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspective in a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning Theory," in *Transformative Learning Theory in Practice: Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, eds. Jack Mezirow et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).
2. Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London: Seabury 1973).
3. Frank Fischer and Alan Mandell, "Transformative Learning in Planning and Policy Deliberation: Probing Social Meaning and Tacit Assumptions," in *The Argumentative Turn in Public Policy Revisited*, eds. Frank Fischer and Herbert Gottweis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

About the Author



Frank Fischer is a research scholar at Humboldt University in Berlin and Faculty Fellow at the University of Kassel in Germany, as well as an Emeritus Professor of Politics and Global Affairs at Rutgers University. His research focuses on environmental policy and public policy, the politics of climate change, and US foreign policy. He is a co-editor of the journal *Critical Policy Studies* and the author of such books as *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge*; *Climate Crisis and the Democratic Prospect: Participatory Governance in Sustainable Communities*; and the forthcoming *Truth and Post-Truth in Public Policy*. He holds a PhD from New York University.



Alan Mandell is SUNY Distinguished Service Professor and College Professor of Adult Learning and Mentoring at SUNY Empire State College. His writing includes the co-edited book *Principles, Practices, and Creative Tensions in Progressive Higher Education* and a recent co-edited volume on John Dewey in the series *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*.

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Cite as Frank Fischer and Alan Mandell, “Educator, Educate Thyself,” contribution to GTI Forum “The Pedagogy of Transition,” *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pedagogy-transition-fischer-mandell>.

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