Transformative Learning Meets Bildung
An International Exchange

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This edited volume sets the groundwork for a dialogue between transformative learning and continental theories of Bildung in adulthood. Both theoretical frameworks bring meaning to the complex learning process of individuals as they develop a more critical worldview. In this volume, a variety of authors from different countries and theoretical backgrounds offer new understandings about Bildung and transformative learning through discussion of theoretical analyses, educational practices, and empirical research. As a result, readers gain greater insight into these theories and related implications for teaching for change. From the various chapters an exciting relationship between both theories begins to emerge and provides impetus for greater discussion and further research about two important theories of change in the field of adult education.
Transformative Learning Meets Bildung
INTERNATIONAL ISSUES IN ADULT EDUCATION

Volume 21

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WHY COMPARE Bildung AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING?

Bildung as well as transformative learning create complex discourses. Research in these fields grows fast and changes constantly. Both approaches analyze complex, prolonged learning processes in which learners reconstruct basic assumptions and expectations that frame their thinking, feeling and acting. They state that learners develop concepts of the world and their selves based on perceptions that are contingent on various perspectives and interpretation. Meaning is seen not only as a cognitive event, but also as a social construct that is produced and changed in social interactions (Marotzki, 2006; Mezirow, 1991).

In the continental European context, theories of Bildung are traditionally used to conceptualize these processes. In Germany for example, where two editors of this book live, research on processes of reconstruction of meaning have only recently included the notion of learning (Faulstich, 2013; Göhlich, 2007; Meyer-Drawe, 2008). The German notion of Bildung is one of the most prominent concepts in continental education. It goes back about 200 years. Many disciplines, including philosophy, historical research, education, social sciences, cultural studies and others, have contributed to research on Bildung. Bildung has no literal translation into English. Some translate it as cultivation, while in the Romance languages, the term formation (frch. formation, it. formazione, span. formación) is used. It refers to processes of interpretation, understanding, or appropriation (Aneignung) of knowledge that transforms the learner’s personality. Bildung is cultivation of the self by the self, as well as to the state of being educated, cultivated, or learned. In his book “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature”, the American pragmatist Richard Rorty (1979) suggests translating Bildung as “edification”. According to Rorty, who goes back to the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer’s theory of Bildung (Gadamer, 1982), Bildung means that a person tries to establish understandings of the world and to edify herself or himself. Bildung is not limited to adults only; it is considered a lifelong process.

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), covering around four decades of theoretical analysis and empirical research, is much younger than theories of Bildung. It argues that adult learning is different from that of children and young
people. Transformative learning is about the re-interpretation of prior experience through reflection, particularly of assumptions acquired uncritically during childhood and youth. Responding to a disorienting experience, learners question taken-for-granted meanings, search for alternative frames of thinking and learn to integrate the alternative meanings into their life. Transformative learning theory proved to be very successful in providing understanding of how adults revise deeply held assumptions about their world. Furthermore, it gave insight into how to foster transformative learning in both formal and nonformal settings. As theory it has been formative to the study of adult learning and development and has also been adopted by a host of other disciplines as a theoretical basis for understanding individual and social change (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Theories of Bildung and transformative learning theories analyze similar processes of learning. Both are interested in complex and prolonged learning processes in which individuals reconstruct their interpretations of their experiences and develop a critical perspective on knowledge. We argue in this text that transformative learning theories and theories of Bildung share some basic propositions. Learning is conceptualized not only as the acquisition of knowledge but also the transformation of existing knowledge structures; and these transformations are not merely cognitive, but involve transformations of the learner’s personality, feelings, and relationships to others.

Despite common interests, both theories are rarely studied in relation to each other. We hope that, with this volume, a dialogue between both traditions will be established that leads to joint international research. Transformative learning and Bildung theories can learn from each other by comparing theoretical assumptions and empirical findings. Transformative learning as well as Bildung theories believe that recognition of difference is a major drive for learning. Most of our learning is based on thoughtful analyses of dilemmas, surprising experiences, and discrepancies in our meanings. Therefore, we suggest paying special attention to differences in assumptions and empirical findings between transformative learning and Bildung research as you read this text. Differences between theories of Bildung and transformative learning can be identified in the following areas: first, languages, policies and institutions; second, research methodologies; third, the stages of life covered by both theories; fourth, philosophical and theoretical traditions.

First, research on Bildung is usually published in German and other continental European languages and in journals and books that are less accessible for research in the English language. Furthermore, it is only in the last decade that a significant number of Bildung researchers started to attend international conferences. For a long time, the different worlds of continental European languages such as German, Italian, French and Spanish were big enough to sustain their own communities of educational sciences. Most researchers, because of the rich tradition and outcome of research in their own country, did not put international dialogue at the top of their agendas. Education is probably among the last academic disciplines to undergo
significant changes because of globalization. Problems of translating continental
theories into the English language and vice versa have also added to the problem.

Also of importance are differences in the overall cultures of Northern America
and Europe and their respective adult education systems. These differences seem to
have a significant impact on theorizing. For example, issues of race and first nation’s
perspectives on learning, which are a big concern in the Anglo-Saxon world, are not
often addressed in continental Europe. In Germany, for example, researchers have
focused for a long time on the institution of folk high schools (Volkshochschulen)
and other adult education institutions supported by the state. Since these institutions
do not exist in Anglo-Saxon countries, it is not easy to translate research from the
cultural and institutional background of Anglo-Saxon countries into German speaking
countries and vice versa. Similar problems exist for many European countries. Even
the exchange between researchers within Europe suffers from these problems.

Second, differences within the methodological approaches between research on
transformative learning and Bildung have an impact on theoretical conceptualization
of learning and Bildung. Empirical research on transformative learning is extensive;
typically, qualitative research designs are used. Theoretical contributions are less
common. Taylor and Cranton state a “stagnation and lack of theoretical progression”
in transformative learning theory due to a “lack of ongoing theoretical analysis”
itself” (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 43), and other similar statements are repeated
constantly. On the other hand, discourses on Bildung are mainly based on
philosophical inquiries. Empirical studies are still quite rare. Over the last few
decades, new theoretical conceptions of Bildung have regularly emerged on the
academic landscape, using, for example, the philosophies of Aristotle (Mertens,
2010), Kant (Koch, 1995), or poststructuralist theories (Koller, 2012; Schäfer,
2011). Classical Bildung theories, not only the ones by Humboldt, but also those
by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770–
1831) and others, were newly interpreted, and philosophers who did not use the
term Bildung, most prominently John Dewey, were re-interpreted as philosophers of
Bildung (Bellmann, 2007). Theoretical aspects like historicity of Bildung, Bildung
and reason, alienation, alterity, Bildung and the body have been discussed at length
(Frost, Böhm, Koch, Ladenthin, & Mertens, 2008, pp. 209–311), but empirical
research is still quite limited (Siljander, Kivelä, & Sutinen, 2012). In essence, theories
on Bildung are mostly supported philosophically, while theories on transformative
learning build on empirical research. For many decades, Bildung theorists believed
that empirical research on Bildung was neither possible nor valuable, since Bildung
is, and should be, a very individual process. No measurements should be imposed on
the individuals. Rejection of empirical research has faded in the last two decades, but
the differences with transformative learning theory methodologies remain.

Both the research sides, transformative learning and Bildung, could profit
from each other by paying attention to research designs used by the other. In
general, qualitative approaches are the preferred choice for empirical research in
transformative learning as well as in Bildung research. While the documentary method (Neuber & Lehmann, in this book; Nohl, in this book), a research design that allows to identify meaning perspectives that are not expressed verbally, is well established in German Bildung research, but less well known outside the German-speaking world, research on transformative learning has involved a wider range of methodologies, including mixed-method designs, ethnographic approaches and arts-based methodologies (Merriam & Kim, 2012). In Europe, non-traditional, but highly innovative and fruitful methods like autoethnography and arts-based methods still lack recognition. Research on Bildung could profit from this wide range of research methodologies used by transformative learning researchers, and from the outcomes of these studies.

Third, transformative learning theory was developed to explain learning in adulthood. In general, research on adult learning emphasizes differences between learning in adulthood and earlier ages. Strong distinctions between learning in youth and adulthood as outlined, for example, by Knowles (1973), were already challenged in the 1970s, and they further eroded with the rise of the concept of lifelong learning and with research on transitions between youth and adulthood (Hof, in this book; Benjamin & Crymble, in this book). Theories of Bildung are now applied to childhood, youth, and adulthood. Bildung is not limited to adulthood. It is a lifelong process. Transformative learning theories might profit from studies on similarities between learning in youth and adulthood and on transitions from youth to adulthood.

Fourth, while transformative learning theory is deeply rooted in the northern American tradition of progressive education, humanistic psychology, and pragmatist philosophy, theories of Bildung are embedded in continental philosophy. Philosophy in general is constantly questioning its theories and methodologies, and so do philosophies of Bildung. In contrast to this, transformative learning theories tend not to doubt their philosophical foundations. For example, Mezirow refers to Habermas’ theory of communicative action, from which he derived the distinction between instrumental, communicative and emancipative learning. He is very explicit about founding transformative learning theory in Habermas’ critical epistemology; and he builds heavily on the pragmatic philosophy developed by John Dewey and others. Pragmatism foregrounds basic concepts that transformative learning theories use, such as experience, habit, and learning. However, while Mezirow does not inquire whether both, Habermas’ critical theory and pragmatic philosophy, fit well together, neither do contemporary researchers of transformative learning refer to recent research on Habermas and Dewey. Mezirow agrees with Dewey that humans need to understand their experiences and want to give coherence to them (Mezirow, 1991, p. 10f). Yet, he uses Dewey mainly to theorize instrumental learning, that is learning in the realm of cause-effect relationships for the sake of task-oriented problem solving (Mezirow, 1991, p. 73).

This interpretation of Dewey seems to be based on the early writings of Dewey, namely “How we think” (Dewey, 1989). Later research on Dewey stresses that he
argued somewhat differently. He delivered a transactional philosophy that rejects dualisms of, for example, thought and action, subject and object, cause and effect, method and aim, or individual and society (Lehmann-Rommel, 2000). In his book “Art and Experience” (Dewey, 1987), Dewey analyzed the connectedness, or wholeness, of sensation, action, thinking and imagination. This book is not so much about the arts, but about experience in general. According to Dewey, experience is aesthetic in the sense that it entails experience of something new and of connectedness to the new. In aesthetic experiences, persons experience something that lies outside of themselves, like the forms and colors in a picture. This is the passive side of experience. At the same time, experience is equally active as it is passive. The artist might experience the beauty of the art piece by relating details of the piece to an idea of the whole meaning of the piece, an idea that the artist cannot easily express verbally, but only through the piece of art itself. In the same way, every experience is aesthetic, as the person links details of what he/she experiences to a broader, more or less implicit understanding of life and world as a whole. In this sense that perception of details is guided by conceptions of the whole and vice versa, the experienced and the experience have their own beauty (Fuhr, 2006). We use this short reconstruction of Dewey’s aesthetic theory to point out that more attention should be given to the theoretical foundations of transformative learning theory and to recent developments in theoretical inquiries into core concepts of transformative learning outside research on adult learning.

We have argued that theories of Bildung and transformative learning can learn from each other by looking at their differences. Each research tradition can learn from the other one. However, the differences should not conceal that both theories generally conceptualize learning very similarly, namely as the reconstruction of experiences. Therefore, for theories of Bildung and transformative learning, the first step of learning from each other will be to perceive the other side and to learn from its theoretical foundations and empirical results. For this purpose, this book represents a great foundation.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

While transformative learning theory is probably the most recognized theory of adult learning currently, it has not had much impact in European countries. This changed in 2011, when the 9th conference of the predominantly North American transformative learning network took place for the first time in Europe. This change of location created access for a large number of European adult educators to engage in the exchange around transformative learning. The conference’s great success created a buzz around a transcontinental conversation about transformative learning. The following conference, hosted in the US again, had very few European participants who met up and worked on the questions about how research around transformative learning could be brought to Europe, which perspectives European scholars could bring to research on transformative learning, and how an exchange between
European research and transformative learning research could be supported. This can be seen as the starting point for the ongoing movement around transformative learning in Europe. Anna Laros was part of these activities. She and Thomas Fuhr believe that transcontinental dialogue can be reinforced by comparing the mainly North American transformative learning theory and the mainly European concept of Bildung. In June 2013, Thomas Fuhr and Anna Laros hosted an international conference “Transformative learning meets Bildung” in Freiburg, Germany, which created another buzz around transformative learning in Europe. In the same summer, a symposium around “Re-framing Transformative Learning: A North American/European Dialogue” was held at the triennial conference of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) in Berlin, which resulted in a special issue of the Journal of Transformative Education (Formenti & Dirkx, 2014). Furthermore, a network on “Interrogating transformative processes in learning and education: an international dialogue” was established within ESREA. The network hosted its first conference in June 2014 on “What’s the point of Transformative Learning”, the second in June 2016 on “The role, nature and difficulties of dialogue in transformative learning”, and will convene every other year.

Due to the great success of these activities and the positive feedback on bringing Bildung and transformative learning theories together, Anna Laros, Thomas Fuhr and Ed Taylor sent out a call for papers for a book on transformative learning meets Bildung. An “Advisory Committee” was formed by renowned scholars from different countries to review the abstracts and to give feedback. The great response we have received with our call for contributions can be seen by the size of this edited volume. 29 chapters present a variety of perspectives and issues associated with Bildung and transformative learning, with a comparison of both theories, the presentation of empirical findings and reports on practices of transformative learning and Bildung. The range is enriched by chapters that are situated in both formal (e.g., higher education) and non-formal (e.g., parent education) settings.

The first section includes introductions by Ed Taylor into transformative learning theory and by Thomas Fuhr into Bildung theory. Both articles give an account of the respective classic concepts and state of research. The following articles are grouped in six further sections: Transformative Learning and Transformative Bildung; Crisis and Continuity; Theoretical Approaches to Bildung and Learning; The Role of the Other in Bildung and Transformative Learning; Transformative Learning and Bildung in Times of Lifelong Learning; Fostering Transformative Learning and Bildung. The final chapter summarizes what the editors have learned from the contributions to this volume. It takes the categories that form the sections of the book and brings them to life by discussing their relevancy to Bildung and transformative learning as informed by the various chapters. Since some chapters give greater attention than others to these categories it is imperative for the reader’s selection of chapters not to be driven exclusively by the category of location. There are many fascinating discussions buried in these chapters, such as the role of identity and transformative...
learning by Knud Illeris, an introduction to self-formation, another emancipatory tradition of adult education, by Jerome Eneau, and a chapter by Hans-Christoph Koller about Bildung as a transformative process, just to mention a few. Enjoy and begin reading about the fascinating relationship between two profound theoretical perspectives of transformation in adult learning. We are optimistic that fruitful and ongoing dialogue between continental theories of adult education that build mainly on theories of Bildung and Anglo-Saxon research on transformative learning will be established.

We owe special thanks to John M. Dirks, Philipp Gonon, Christiane Hof, Elizabeth J. Tisdell, Linden West, and Christine Zeuner from the advisory committee. Each of them read several articles and gave fruitful feedback to the editors. Helen West supported us with the English language and proofread every paper of non-native writers. It has been a pleasure working with all of you!

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SECTION 1
OVERVIEW ON BILDUNG AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING
1. BILDUNG

An Introduction

Translated into English, the German notion of Bildung means education, as in “Erwachsenenbildung” (adult education) or “Bildungswissenschaften” (educational sciences). Beside this general use, Bildung is also a philosophical concept that refers to processes of cultivation of human capacities as well as to the end state of this process, the state of being educated, cultivated, or erudite. Discourses on Bildung revolve around what it means to be human. They traditionally argue that there is no fixed or general concept of humanity. Hence, each individual shall be enabled to actively participate in discourses and to develop her or his capacities to a high level. To develop one’s own understanding of humanity, rationality, subjectivity, individuality, and searching for knowledge are very important not only for the individuals concerned but they are also a necessary precondition for the development of societies.

Bildung is not only a theory of learning in adulthood, as is transformative learning theory, but it is also a comprehensive cultural pattern of meaning that served to strengthen and keep alive the cultural identity of the German bourgeoisie for around two centuries (Bollenbeck, 1994). It shaped the German conception of the public, statehood, and individuality, with a state having a mission of promoting the Bildung of the citizens. And, with the citizens, to develop their moral selves through Bildung.

In the following, I will give an overview of the history of discourses on Bildung. Particular attention will be given to the classic neo-humanist concept of Bildung which was developed two centuries ago. Then, critiques of the classic concept of Bildung and contemporary discourses on Bildung will be covered. I will argue that Bildung theory addresses issues like what it means to be human, what it means to know, and how knowledge supports personal development as well as social progress. There are no definite answers to these questions. Any society, and any person, has to inquire into them anew. This is what Bildung is all about.

HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF BILDUNG

The idea of Bildung has a long, manifold and inconsistent history. It is influenced by classic Greek humanism which stands for the idea of paideia: mankind can develop its capacities to a high level, and striving for truth, beauty and virtue is the real calling of mankind. According to this line of thought, Bildung is a never ending
process of critically assessing knowledge. This is what Socrates did in the dialogues Plato has written down: he helped the partners in his dialogues to question meanings that they uncritically took for granted. In the allegory of the cave, Plato argued that learning does not mean the acquisition of new knowledge, but painful transition from uncritically taken for granted knowledge to truth.

Another line stems from the antique roman rhetorical tradition, with the idea that good orators need to obtain a broad body of knowledge and a good understanding of the topics of their speeches, and that the orator is not only an expert in giving speeches, but a virtuous, ethical responsible citizen. The emergence of the modern world and the Enlightenment brought the ideas of freedom of thought, that every individual has the right to learn, and that free search for knowledge adds to the progress of society.

The German Enlightenment came later than the French and the English ones. Partly as a reaction to the terror of the French revolution, the late German proponents of Enlightenment followed a neo-humanist approach, which I will discuss later. While the idea of Bildung was prominent throughout the 19th century, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that specific scholarly discourses on Bildung were established on a regular basis. Then, throughout the 20th century, theories of Bildung were considered by many scholars as forming the core of educational theory. A scientific infrastructure of university chairs with the denomination Allgemeine Pädagogik, which literally means General Pedagogy, was established from the 1970s onwards, those chairs often working mainly in the area of theories of Bildung. Also, a commission called Bildungs- und Erziehungsphilosophie (Philosophy of Bildung and Education) was built up within the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft, the German Society of Educational Studies, offering support for scholarly discourses on Bildung. While most theories of Bildung focused on Bildung in childhood and youth, adult education was dominated by Bildung theory as well. From the beginning of adult education in the 19th century until now, Bildung was considered to be a core concept of adult education.

THE CLASSIC CONCEPT

In the first decades of the 19th century, Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841) developed a theory of education which dominated discourses on education in the second half of the 19th century far beyond German speaking countries. He argued that the aim of education is the child’s development of a “many-sided interest” in natural sciences and humanities (Herbart, 1902). Interest is not only a prerequisite for education, but education should develop and broaden interest. A person with varied interests and a broad knowledge in many subjects will be able to perceive in a more detailed way than one with a narrow interest and limited knowledge, and it will tend to avoid one-sided judgements.

Since the first half of the 20th century, a majority of authors consider Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), a representative of German neo-humanism, to be most
important for the development of the idea of Bildung. This is surprising because Humboldt did not present a coherent major theoretical work, as Herbart and others did. As far as the theory of Bildung is concerned, Humboldt wrote mostly political papers (Humboldt, 1964a, 1964c) and a theoretical fragment (Humboldt, 1964b). His views on Bildung are spread across several writings. It took almost a century until Eduard Spranger (1909, 1910) introduced them into scholarly educational discourses at the beginning of the 20th century, arguing that Humboldt had developed a very systematic theory of Bildung.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, brother of the natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt, was an aristocrat who, as a young man, had travelled to Paris to witness the French revolution. He was fascinated by the liberal ideas of the revolution, but horrified by the cruelties of the revolutionary terror. Later, he devoted some years of his life to languages, arts, and philosophy. After these years, he worked as an ambassador for the state of Prussia. Then he served as principal of the section of education at the Prussian ministry of the interior for about one year. He became famous for the educational reforms he initiated in this political role and for some writings, mainly political memorandums and reform plans, though most of them were not published before the middle of the 18th century. For readers with no command of German, Bruford (1975) gives an instructive account of the life and major motives of Humboldt, derived mainly from his letters. Humboldt was in close contact with representatives of Weimar Classicism like Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Hoffmann, 2012). He participated in the most prestigious salons in Berlin, where a high culture was nurtured. In his younger years he founded, together with Henriette Herz, the so-called “Tugendbund” (community of virtue), an association for mutual self-improvement and moral cultivation. His life gives a good example of how the idea of Bildung, as mutual self-improvement through self-directed learning and mutual exchange of knowledge with like-minded persons, was perceived in these times.

According to Humboldt, Bildung is the development of the capacities of individuals to their fullest possible potential (Konrad, 2012). Through educating oneself, the person will develop the idea of humanity in its own individual way to the highest possible level. In the same way, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s statement from the mid-18th century, that education is not about the forming of citizens, but of the formation of the humans themselves, is still a cornerstone of modern theories of Bildung. Humans shall develop humanity by themselves, in their own ways, through self-directed appropriation of the world. Humanity shall be constituted by humans through Bildung.

In the 19th century, the acquisition of languages, namely ancient Greek, was an extremely important part of Bildung. In the words of Spranger (1910, p. 64), to Humboldt the ancient Greeks were “the source of historical, ethical and esthetic education per se”. The Christian world was regarded as full of “disharmonious disruptions”: ideal and life, the eternal and the temporal, content and form are separated. Therefore, one has to go back to the Greeks to find examples of harmonious
humanity at the highest level ever reached. In the ancient republics a form of political life was established that allowed men to live in harmony with their bodily nature and the community. It allowed a moral life which was both human and beautiful. While it was clear to Humboldt that this form of life cannot be reestablished, he argued that studying ancient Greek language, literature and philosophy allows individuals to develop their capacities to a high level, which could not be achieved with the utilitarian education that was becoming more and more prominent in his time. And he strongly believed in Bildung as a means to regenerate the German nation that was, at this time, struggling to survive in competition with Napoleonic France. Spranger did not agree with Humboldt’s uncritical embracing of the Greeks. However, he agreed to the liberal idea that human beings are not born with a fixed, inherited aim, to which they shall be educated, but as open beings that need to educate themselves.

Humboldt used his political power to reform the education system of the state of Prussia. His best known initiative was the founding of the University of Berlin, now “Humboldt University”. He contested the tendency of his age to transform universities into professional schools and to establish new professional higher education institutions. Professional schools do not provide a varied Bildung for their students. For example, he did not want the Pépinière, a medical school for military surgeons, to establish links to the university, and he would not allow students of this institution to visit university courses as long as they do not have profound scholarship and “general” Bildung (Allgemeine Bildung). That Bildung should be “general” is a central element to theories of Bildung. To be general, Bildung must fulfill certain conditions. First, one person’s Bildung is general if the person does not have knowledge in one domain only, but a broad understanding of many subjects. Second, Bildung as cultivation of the powers of persons is a concern of every person, and every person should therefore be allowed to undertake Bildung. Third, the person must study subjects that allow for true insights. Traditionally, general Bildung is associated with liberal studies, music, literature, humanities, philosophy, and development of the sentiments. The preference for these activities goes back to Plato’s notion of “ideas”. Ideas are concepts that are universal and do not change in time and space. We might not be able to grasp them, but searching for truth, beauty and morality is the highest activity in which one can be engaged. Bildung in this sense is striving for knowledge about ideas. In contrast to the world of ideas, the world in which we live consists of contingent and accidental things that change over time and space. No real knowledge (episteme) is possible in the realm of the material world, only changing beliefs (doxa).

Humboldt did not argue against the existence of vocational schools for agriculture, business, and so on. He knew that, in his times, most pupils do not enter universities. They needed some preparation for a vocation. But he did not support professional schools in higher education, and he did not want vocational education elements in the middle schools. Secondary and higher education should not prepare for certain businesses. It should strive for a comprehensive, general, humanistic education with languages (preferably Greek and Latin) in the center of the curriculum. In the
universities, students should be allowed to freely search for knowledge in the realm of a community of students and scholars of liberal subjects:

To the University is reserved, what only humans can find by and in themselves, the insight into the pure science. For this self-act in the truest sense, freedom is necessary and loneliness is helpful, and from these two points arise the whole outer organization of universities. Attending lectures is only a minor matter, essential is that for a number of years, one lives for oneself and for the sciences, in close fellowship with like-minded people and peers, and with the awareness that there are in the same place a number of already fully erudite persons that are dedicated to the increase and diffusion of science only. (Humboldt, 1964a, p. 191, Trans. TF)

Some central aspects of the classical theory of Bildung can be found in this paragraph. Some of them I already covered: Universities do not prepare for the professions only, but allow for general Bildung. Bildung is an act of the self, the learner, not the educator. It is an engagement with “pure science”, that is those disciplines that do not cover the material world, but allow for a search for true knowledge. So, two further central aspects of Bildung now need to be covered. First, and most powerful in history, was the idea that academic freedom is needed. Both teachers and students are entitled to academic freedom. Humboldt had a very idealistic concept of academic freedom. He believed that once academic freedom is granted to universities, students and teachers will join together to mutually promote both their Bildung and the sciences. The second important argument that can be found in the above quotation is that higher education institutions strive for the “increase” of science. They shall not teach established knowledge without being engaged in inquiry. Research, teaching and learning need to be linked to each other, so that the universities produce knowledge instead of only reproducing it. Learners participate in the production of knowledge. Knowledge is produced by both parties involved, teachers and learners. Humboldt strongly believed that learning does not take place in knowledge about which someone else has found to be truth. In the process of learning, learners assess knowledge claims; they search for what is true and right; they establish knowledge by themselves. Teachers that assist learners in this process do not try to impart knowledge to the learners. Teachers join students in assessing knowledge claims. At least at universities, learners and teachers should both work together in the search for knowledge and Bildung.

In sum, classic Bildung theory argues that Bildung should be varied and free. Liberal arts are preferred to vocational and professional training. Bildung means to produce knowledge rather than just to take in knowledge. And it needs to take place in communities of learners, where ideas are exchanged and personal relationships established.

In 19th century Germany, specialized institutions of higher education did not succeed. Since these times, universities are renowned as the highest institutions of Bildung. However, in the thinking of the 19th century, Bildung was not reserved for
university studies only. A variety of literature and institutions of Bildung for adults, like museums and libraries, emerged. In the cities, so called Museum societies were established. Members met for lectures, free exchange of knowledge, and reading. Some of them met in private houses or in clubs, but in the course of time many erected representative buildings that symbolized the longing of the bourgeoisie for Bildung and political power. Bildung took place not only in universities, but in many forms of mutual learning in civil life of the time. In private salons, for example, music was performed, books were read together, poems were recited, and political issues were discussed. Bildung formed the core of the self-concept of the bourgeois classes.

From the late 19th century, adult education institutions were set up and discourses on adult learning and adult education were established on a regular basis. Up to 1933, and then again after the Nazi years until the 1960s, in Western and Eastern Germany as well, Bildung was the most important theoretical concept in adult education. In the last decades, the concepts of qualification, competence, and learning became prominent. The concept of Bildung was critically reviewed, and it is now a contested concept.

CRITIQUE OF THE CLASSIC CONCEPT

In the last 100 years, Humboldt’s ideas on Bildung, and theories of Bildung in general, have been subject to various inquiries, modifications, and critique. It was argued that Bildung is an elitist concept; that it was used in a nationalistic way; that the classic concept of Bildung builds on an outdated understanding of human nature; that vocational education should not be excluded from Bildung; and that it implies a philosophy of the subject that is doubted by postmodernism. In the light of these criticisms, the concept, practice and policies of Bildung have undergone some changes. I will address the first three critiques in the following paragraphs. The fourth critique will be covered later in the section on contemporary international discourses.

As an elitist concept, Bildung was used as a marker for the educated classes. Those who were not educated in the humanities did not know the vocabulary of the educated classes; they did not belong. Bildung allowed for emancipation from the nobility, and it was used to legitimize a “cultural hegemony” (Bollenbeck, 1994, p. 193) over the “uneducated” classes. But it also inspired those who fought against poverty and social exclusion. Bildung has been a strong means of emancipation for the working classes in the second half of the 19th century. Teachers were among the most active propagandists of Bildung for farmers, craftsmen, and the working poor. Until our times, educational and cultural policy is informed by the idea that Bildung should be available to everyone. The idea of Bildung helped, for example, to build up publicly supported adult education centers throughout Germany, to support performing arts of all sorts, and to offer public radio, television, and internet channels.
Particularly in the second half of the 19th century, the same educated classes that built up hegemony over the common people also tried to draw a line between German culture and that of other nations, and to assert the supremacy of the former over the latter. Not every proponent of Bildung joined the nationalistic and oppressive discourse. But in sum, Bildung served to claim power over others, in Germany and abroad. Bollenbeck (1994) stated that the semantics of Bildung was part of the unique path that Germany took in the 19th century. Not having been successful in the fight for national unity and emancipation of the citizens, educated Germans identified themselves by cultural bonds. Bildung as a process in which individuals form their own personality autonomously matched the political situation of a country fragmented in different states, united by culture only. As the land of poets and thinkers, Germany claimed superiority over the politically and economically further developed European nation-states, especially over the rival France. Bildung could easily serve as a nationalistic concept. The concepts of culture and Bildung were put in opposition to the concept of civilization, which was regarded as a French concept. Civilization was considered to be a too superficial and political concept, while the concept of Bildung was related to self-determination, deeper sensitivity and individuality.

This leads to the third critique, that the classic, neo-humanist concept of Bildung entails an outdated theory of human nature. According to Wilhelm, the neo-humanist idea of human nature was largely determined by Goethe: that life is understood as growth to the ripe fruit, that no organic creature might escape from the predispositions set by its germ, yet none will survive without transformation of its form, that anyone bears in himself from birth the law of self-formation, the idea of entelechy and of perfection of form, “according to the law by which you begun”, the naive ignoring of the environmental dependence of plants and animals – all that became part of the common understanding in Germany through our classical literature. (Wilhelm, 1975, p. 154)

The concept of Bildung was closely linked to the idea that powers exist in each individual that can be nourished by the individual herself or himself. Weimar classic opposed natural sciences as being superficial, mechanic, and technical. It preferred organic thinking over analytic, and so did theories of Bildung. Bildung was closely linked to historicism prominent in 19th century. Historicism argued that humans are embedded in history, and that political institutions are products of organic, cultural processes rather than rational products of human reason.

Closely connected with the preference for the humanities over natural sciences is the disregard for vocational education. The preference for the humanities goes back, as I said, to the philosophy of Plato, and also to a practice that can be found in classic Greek. Greek culture wanted the whole person to develop. However, it was evident already in this time that an encyclopedic Bildung that entails gymnastics, music, letters, sciences and art is impossible to achieve. In the light of the incompatibility of
general and specialist Bildung. Greek culture voted for humanist Bildung, or paideia, against specialist vocational education. It favored the old Athenian education of the young noble male, who enjoyed leisure, over the education of specialists who needed long training in their particular field (Marrou, 1982, pp. 36–45). Liberal education was supposed to result in a kind of indeterminate human product of very high intrinsic quality, ready to respond to any demand made upon it by the intellect or circumstance – paideia. The Ancients were very much alive of this kind of latent potentiality. (Marrou, 1982, p. 223)

Helping persons to develop their individuality in a social context, instead of aligning education with the demands of the labor market, is still relevant for many. The concept of Bildung is used, for example, to argue against the Bologna reforms in higher education that tried to align university studies with the demands of employers. However, throughout the 20th century many Bildung theorists tried to find a way to include vocational education into the concept of Bildung (Kerschensteiner, 1959; Litt, 1955; Spranger, 1969). It was argued that vocational education should not prepare for the demands of specific workplaces. Instead, it was thought it should encourage a wide range of knowledge and skills including general education subjects. Vocation was not conceived as a set of skills only, but also as a calling, a moral enterprise. It was argued that vocational education can be a legitimate form of Bildung if it follows these lines. In that way, the idea of Bildung was crucial in the development of the vocational education system in German speaking countries.

Despite the critique of classic conceptions of Bildung, the following claims form common ground for most who inquire into Bildung:

1. Humans are free to constitute themselves. There is no human nature that needs to be accomplished, no doctrine that has to be accepted. Human nature is open for self-determination.
2. Self-constitution proceeds by the medium of knowledge. To become a more autonomous person able to act in the social environment and to give reasons for what she or he does, the person needs to examine knowledge throughout their whole life.
3. Bildung is a lifelong endeavor.
4. Bildung has worth in its own right. While Bildung can entail vocational learning, it should not be limited by utilitarian purposes and be only vocational.
5. Society should provide ample opportunities for Bildung. Advocates of Bildung usually hold the state responsible for securing a high level of Bildung. In line with this tradition, Germany does not have as many private schools and universities as the English speaking world, and every small town has its own adult education center (Volkshochschule) that provides general education, unfortunately mainly for the middle class.
6. Theorists of Bildung mistrust any proposition that claims to be universal. They agree with Socrates that learning is more about asking questions than it is about
knowing the truth. To challenge meanings, one has to engage in dialogues, and that is where the teacher comes on the scene. Teachers help students to look beyond the everyday meanings by engaging them in meaningful dialogues on the epistemological foundations of the propositions they hold for truth.

7. The seventh claim is somehow in opposition to the sixth. While theorists of Bildung argue that Bildung is essentially done by the individuals themselves, many support very rigorous teaching and instruction. They not only sympathize with Plato’s Socrates, but also with his allegory of the cave. Humans tend to take for granted what they see and experience, but they should be turned around by teachers, the modern philosopher kings, to see the light. Whereas there is a strong movement in the English speaking world that favors experiential learning over curriculum driven learning, many advocates of Bildung value teaching and instruction (Liessmann, 2014) more highly than experiential and self-directed learning. In this respect, Bildung is quite different from transformative learning. Transformative learning theory argues that critical assessment of knowledge claims is made by reasoning and in dialogues in and outside of classrooms. Many Bildung theorists do not believe in everyday learning. They favor organized introduction into disciplines of knowledge. Knowledge is complex, hard to acquire, and it should not be confused with common sense. While Bildung promises to support learners in their striving for personal development, a practice of Bildung still can be found, in schools and universities, that is guided by the idea that before students develop their own understanding of the world, they need to be introduced to a wide variety of subjects. Before they constitute their own understanding, students need to acquire a body of knowledge and an understanding of the epistemological foundations of the subjects.

CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSES

The idea of Bildung had a strong impact on education policies in continental Europe. In Germany, it was not until the Bologna reforms at the beginning of the 21st century that the universities were forced to adjust their curricula to the needs of the labor market and that the superiority of universities over higher vocational schools was challenged. However, the classic concept of Bildung seems to be outdated, and so are the institutions that represented it: the grammar school; the university as an institution of free, liberal education for all; operas and theaters as institutions of moral education for every adult. Those institutions still exist, but education throughout the lifespan is much more driven by the idea of employability than Bildung (Lima & Guimarães, 2011). The concept of Bildung is still alive in speeches and papers, but it is claimed as a guiding principle often in an untruthful way, hiding the fact that institutions are governed on the basis of other ideas. Educational governance is about survival in a market and developing competences in the learners that are needed in the labor market. Bildung seems to be an obsolete German concept which is no longer connected to any institutional practice. It does not fit with modern policies of
lifelong learning, and it is not compatible with international discourses on learning. Many argue that it should be given up because of this very critique.

Despite these challenges the idea of Bildung is still alive, not only in German speaking countries, but throughout continental Europe and abroad. In German discourses, the term Bildung is still used in the classical neo-humanist sense (Liessmann, 2015; Nida-Rümelin, 2013). In current language, Bildung is not limited to philosophy, literature, and fine arts; natural sciences are included. It is applied to liberal education as well as to professional and vocational. And it is used with reference to specific domains of knowledge. A person who has Bildung in law, medicine, or education has a broad understanding of her or his field. She or he has a grasp of a wide range of knowledge in the field and is able to make professional judgments without the biases and limitation that stem from too narrow a knowledge.

The idea of Bildung is also used, by conservatives and critical theorists alike, to criticize the supremacy of economic approaches to learning that can be found, for example, in lifelong learning policies from the European Union. Lima and Guimarães claim that the EU lifelong learning policies are based on a neo-liberal human resources management rationale. They argue for a “humanistic project” (Lima & Guimarães, 2011, p. 145), that is, welfare state policies that include better provision of education for everyone.

What is grasped with the concept of Bildung can also be found in non-German pedagogy, not only in continental Europe but also in Anglo-Saxon discourses. While the word Bildung is not used regularly in Anglo-Saxon education, the basic idea is well known. Analyses and discourses similar to continental Bildung discourses can be found in fields such as philosophy of education and adult education theory. As we argue in the introduction to this volume, there are many similarities between the theories of Bildung and transformative learning theory. Here, I will mention a few similarities between classic continental Bildung theory and Anglo-Saxon educational theory.

One classical text is Richard Peter’s book “Ethics and Education” (1974). Richard Peters, an analytical philosopher born in 1919, was professor of philosophy of education at the University of London, Institute of Education. He argues the term education should signify that something worthwhile has been taught, and learned, in a morally acceptable way. This leads to questions like: How do we come to know which knowledge is worth achieving? Which criteria can be applied in the search for worthwhile knowledge? These are the same questions that theories of Bildung ask. Peters holds a “cognitive perspective” for a central criterion of education:

For a man to be educated it is insufficient that he should possess a mere know-how or knack. He must have also some body of knowledge and some kind of conceptual scheme to raise this above a collection of disjointed facts. This implies some understanding of principles for the organization of the facts. We would not call a man who was merely well informed an educated man. (Peters, 1974, p. 30)

In order to have a reasonably differentiated “cognitive perspective” a person has not only learned some distinct facts, but has developed some understanding of
relationships between the facts. And since such subjects as mathematics or history
are based on distinct epistemologies, the person needs to understand the organizing
principles of the subject being studied. Furthermore, the cognitive perspective of the
learner should not be too narrow, confined, and specialized. Peters argues that every
person needs to look into different subjects, because only on the basis of knowledge
in different subjects like the humanities, arts, and natural sciences, can the person
know which knowledge is worthwhile. Summing up, in order to be “educated” a
person should know a broad variety of subjects; should have an understanding of the
underlying principles of the subjects; and the “whole person” (Peters, 1974, p. 32)
should be touched by this understanding.

“Ethics and Education” is discussed in many ways (Cuypers & Martin, 2011).
My overall point is that there is an English language tradition of inquiries into
aims, ethics, and methods of education that shares many themes with theories of
Bildung. There is a scientific infrastructure of Philosophy of Education Societies and
journals like Educational Theory (US), Journal of Philosophy of Education (GB) and
Educational Philosophy and Theory (Australasia); topics and theories overlap with
continental research on Bildung. More comparative research needs to be done into
similarities and differences between both traditions.

From an adult education point of view, it is especially problematic that Peters
takes it more or less for granted that the philosopher of education, or teachers, rather
than the learner answer the question of what should be learned. While one might
argue that this claim is appropriate for primary schools up to higher education,
adult education tends to let the learners themselves decide what to learn. However,
a case should also be made for inquiries into which knowledge adults should pay
attention to, and that institutions are maintained that provide adults with learning
opportunities in these subjects. This is what educational philosophers like Peters
and Bildung theorists do. They inquire into what it means to know something, the
relevance of knowledge for personal development, and the impact of educational
and cultural policies on personal and social development.

While Peters provides an example of English educational theory that comes close
to Bildung theory without employing the term Bildung, there are some theorists that
explicitly refer to Bildung. While Biesta (2007), like Peters, focuses very much
on the education of younger generations, he has a somewhat broader understanding
of education which includes adult education. He presents a theory of education which
is quite different to Peters’ idea of a worthwhile curriculum in which learners should
be initiated. He criticizes how the concept of learning is used, and he argues for a
renewed concept of Bildung. Learning is not to be regarded as a process of taking
in something which is exterior. An educationally meaningful concept of learning
does not conceptualize learning as receiving knowledge that is out there somewhere
before learning starts and that will be incorporated through learning. Nor should
learning be equated with the acquisition of competences.

Biesta suggests understanding learning as an “answer”, a response to a disturbance
and an attempt to reorganize meaning after disintegration. He asks, “how we might
understand and “do” education if we no longer assume that we can know the essence and nature of human being” (Biesta, 2007, p. 4). Classic Bildung theory argued that rational autonomy and personal identity are of upmost importance. From a postmodern perspective, Biesta doubts rationality, autonomy, and personal identity. He argues that humanism set up Bildung as a norm, an ideal that learners have to strive for. From a postmodern point of view, there is no way of establishing norms that are uncontestable. Bildung as a norm was often used to marginalize others who were not well educated. It was even used, as in colonialism, to define who counts as human, and who not.

Biesta argues that instead of setting up Bildung as a norm, humanism is “a radically open question, a question that can only be answered by engaging in education rather than as a question that needs to be answered before we can engage in education” (Biesta, 2007, p. 9). Education is not the “production” of an autonomous and rational person by someone called educator, but a practice of “coming into the world” for both. Learning, in the sense of “coming into the world”, is not taking in some knowledge that is already out there somewhere, but responding to the world. Learning is “entering the social fabric”, asking others and oneself questions like “What do you think about it?”, “Where do you stand?”, and “How will you respond?” Asking these questions is not always easy. In fact, Bildung is not a pleasure only. It is a way to help each other to transform and to “come into the world”.

While Biesta is very critical of the essentialist claims of classic Bildung theory, his concept of education aligns very closely with the humanist ideal of Bildung:

Education is not just about the transmission of knowledge, skills, and values, but is concerned with the individuality, subjectivity, or personhood of the student, with their “coming into the world” as unique, singular beings. (Biesta, 2007, p. 27)

Biesta reclaims some central arguments of classic Bildung theory from a postmodern and critical perspective. Most contemporary theories of Bildung are developed on poststructuralist grounds. They are suspicious of theories that articulate a universal or somehow general idea of Bildung. Schäfer (2011) argues that the classical theory of Bildung implies the concepts of identity of a person and of subjectivity, concepts that are challenged by postmodernist and poststructuralist theories. I take Biesta and Schäfer as examples of theorizing Bildung. What I learned from them, and from others, is that Bildung is a problematic concept. But it is neither outdated nor an exclusively German, or continental European, path. Theories of Bildung still have much to say. They pose questions that will never be answered definitely. Each time has to rethink them anew.

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2. TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

There is an instinctive drive among all humans to make meaning of their daily lives. Since there are no enduring truths, and change is continuous, we cannot always be assured of what we know or believe. It, therefore, becomes imperative in adulthood that we develop a more critical worldview as we seek ways to better understand our world. This involves learning “how to negotiate and act upon our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). Developing more reliable beliefs, exploring and validating their fidelity, and making informed decisions are fundamental to the adult learning process. It is transformative learning theory that explains this learning process of constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world (Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Almost 40 years ago when Jack Mezirow (1978) first introduced a theory of adult learning it helped explain how adults changed the way they interpreted their world. This theory of transformative learning is considered uniquely adult that is grounded in human communication where “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). The transformative process is formed and circumscribed by a frame of reference. Frames of reference are meaning structures inclusive of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual’s tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs, and actions. It is the revision of a frame of reference in concert with reflection on experience that is addressed by the theory of perspective transformation—a paradigmatic shift. The transformative process explains how adults revise their meaning structures. Meaning structures act as culturally defined frames of reference that are inclusive of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. Meaning schemes, the smaller components, indicative of specific beliefs, values, and feelings that reflect interpretation of experience. They are the tangible signs of our habits and expectations that influence and shape a particular behavior or view, such as how an adult may act when they are around a homeless person or think of a Republican or Democrat. Although, changes in meaning schemes are a regular and frequent occurrence.

Mezirow (2000) argues that meaning perspectives are often acquired uncritically in childhood through acculturation and socialization, most often during significant learning experiences with parents, teachers, and other mentors and they reflect the dominant culture of which we have been socialized into. Over time these perspectives

A. Laros et al. (Eds.), Transformative Learning Meets Bildung, 17–29. © 2008 Wiley Periodicals Incorporated. All rights reserved.
become more ingrained into our psyche providing a rationalization for an often, irrational world. They are a reflection of our cultural and psychological assumptions, constraining our worldview, often distorting our thoughts and perceptions. We become dependent upon them and change in perspective is often very difficult. They are like a “double-edged sword” whereby they give meaning (validation) to our experiences, but at the same time skew our reality.

A perspective transformation, although arguably a rare occurrence leads to “a more fully developed (more functional) frame of reference … one that is more (a) inclusive, (b) differentiating, (c) permeable, (d) critically reflective, and (e) integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163). A perspective transformation can occur either through a series of cumulative transformed meaning schemes or as a result of an acute personal or social crisis, for example, a natural disaster, a death of a significant other, divorce, a debilitating accident, war, job loss, or retirement. Often these experiences are stressful, painful, and can cause individuals to question the very core of their existence (Mezirow, 1997). An example of a perspective transformation is illustrated by Marie Claire, an American, who describes her experience of moving to Switzerland for a number of years:

I was very sheltered before [moving]. I think it made me aware of the fact that there are people who do things differently. There are different cultures … I tended to look at things a lot more basic … People are the same all over the world to a certain extent. You got to go to work. You got to do your daily job. I tended not to be so narrow minded … What I really thought about the United States was how shallow, how provincial … We didn’t know anything about other countries, we were so isolated. We always thought we were the best. I was starting to think that maybe we weren’t the best, because we are missing out on so much. When you’re living in Europe you’re exposed to so many different languages and cultures and so much history and beauty that we miss out on here. We are isolated, so I started to think of my country as not being number one anymore. (Taylor, 1993, p. 179)

To begin to make sense of Marie Clair’s experience it is helpful to explore phases of perspective transformation identified by Mezirow (1990) based on a national study of women returning to college who participate in an academic reentry program after a long hiatus from school. These phases inductively reveal learning processes that begin with a disorienting dilemma similar to Marie Clair’s experience when she moved to live in a second culture (Switzerland) (Taylor, 1994). This initial phase is followed by a series of experiences (struggling to communicating with others and managing the daily routines of your life), the self-examination of feelings associated with inadequacy and lack of confidence, provoking a critical assessment of assumptions, the sharing of this discontent with others, exploration and experimentation with new roles and ideas, developing a course of action, acquiring new skills and knowledge, taking on new roles in the new culture, building competence and confidence living in a new culture, and ultimately the development of a more inclusive and critical worldview.
Central to Marie Claire’s transformation is her intercultural experiences, critically reflecting on her experience and engaging in dialogue with others. Her experience of learning to adjust to living in Switzerland becomes the gist for critical reflection.

[Shared] learning experiences establish a common base from which each learner constructs meaning through personal reflection and group discussion. … The meanings that learners attach to their experiences may be subjected to critical scrutiny. (Tennant, 1991, p. 197)

Critical scrutiny or, more specifically, critical reflection is seen as the conscious and explicit reassessment of the consequence and origin of our meaning structures. It “is a process by which we attempt to justify our beliefs, either by rationally examining assumptions, often in response to intuitively becoming aware that something is wrong with the result of our thought, or challenging its validity through discourse with others of differing viewpoints and arriving at the best informed judgment” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46).

Marie Claire’s discourse with others in the host culture was the medium through which transformation was promoted and developed. However, in contrast to everyday discussions, this kind of discourse is used “when we have reason to question the comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness, (in relation to norms), or authenticity (in relation to feelings) of what is being asserted” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 77). Through multiple interactions with others Marie Claire questioned her deeply held assumptions about her own culture in relationship to the host culture.

Since the early 1980’s, this learning theory has spawned a number of alternative theoretical conceptions and a treasure chest of research, both about the basic assumptions of transformative learning and the fostering of transformative learning in the classroom. The forthcoming section discusses emerging conceptions of transformative learning followed by related research on the practice of transformative learning.

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

The ubiquitous acceptance of Mezirow’s psycho-critical view of transformative learning theory has often led to an uncontested assumption that there is a singular conception of transformative learning, overshadowing a growing presence of other theoretical conceptions. Even though efforts have been made in the past to make sense of varied perspectives (e.g., Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Dirkx, 1998; Taylor & Cranton, 2012), their numbers are limited and contributions to transformative learning not fully appreciated. At present, it can be argued that there are a variety of alternative conceptions of transformative learning theory that refer to similar ideas and address factors often overlooked in the dominant theory of transformation (e.g., Mezirow), such as the role of spirituality, positionality, emancipatory learning, and neurobiology. The exciting part of this diversity of theoretical perspectives is that it
has the potential to offer a more diverse interpretation of transformative learning and has significant implications for practice.

To bring the reader up to date, in a previous chapter on transformative learning (Merriam, 2001) three alternative perspectives were discussed in contrast to Mezirow’s psycho-critical perspective of transformative learning: psychoanalytic, psycho-developmental, and social emancipatory. A psychoanalytic view of transformative learning is seen as a process of individuation, a lifelong journey coming to understand oneself through reflecting on the psychic structures (ego, shadow, persona, collective unconscious, etc.) that make up an individual’s identity. Individuation involves the discovery of new talents, a sense of empowerment and confidence, a deeper understanding of one’s inner self, and greater sense of self-responsibility (e.g., Boyd & Meyers, 1988; Cranton, 2000; Dirkx, 2000). A psycho-developmental view of transformative learning is a perspective of transformative learning across the lifespan, reflecting continuous, incremental, and progressive growth. This is indicative of small changes that continually lead to a more inclusive and discriminating worldview. Central to this view of transformation is epistemological change (change in the ways in which we make meaning), not just change in behavioral repertoire or quantity of knowledge. In addition, there is appreciation for the role of relationships, personal contextual influences, and holistic ways of knowing in transformative learning, that have been often overlooked in Mezirow’s rational emphasis to transformation (Daloz, 1986; Kegan, 1994).

In the latter perspectives, including Mezirow’s psycho-critical view, the unit of analysis is the individual, with little consideration given to the role of context and social change in the transformative experience. On the other hand, a third alternative perspective, a social-emancipatory view, in a small way, starts to address these concerns. Rooted primarily in the work of Paolo Freire, this perspective is about developing an “ontological vocation” (Freire, 1984, p. 12); a theory of existence, which views people as subjects, not objects, who are constantly reflecting and acting on the transformation of their world so it can become a more equitable place for all to live. Its goal is social transformation by demythicizing reality, where the oppressed develop a critical consciousness (e.g., conscientization) of their world.

Three teaching approaches are central to fostering emancipatory transformative learning (Freire & Macedo, 1995). First, is fostering critical reflection with a purpose of rediscovering power and helping learners develop an awareness of agency to transform society and their own reality. Second, is engaging in a liberating approach to teaching couched in “acts of cognition not in the transferal of information” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 67), but instead acts of “problem-posing” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 70) and dialogical methodology. Third, is the importance of establishing a horizontal student-teacher relationship where the teacher works as a political agent and on an equal footing with students.

In addition to the previously discussed views, four additional views of transformative learning (Neurobiological, Cultural-spiritual, Race-centric, Planetary) have lately emerged in the field. Most recent is the neurobiological perspective of
transformative learning (Janik, 2005). This “brain-based” theory was discovered by clinicians using medical imaging techniques to study brain functions of patients who were recovering from psychological trauma. What these researchers determined was that a neurobiological transformation is seen as invoking “the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, and the hypothalamic-pituitary pitocin secreting endocrine system to alter learning during periods of search and discovery” (Janik, 2007, p. 12). In simpler terms, the findings suggest that the brain structure actually changes during the learning process. These findings, in turn, bring into question the traditional models of learning (behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism) and instead offer a distinctive neurobiological physically-based pathway to transformative learning. From this perspective, learning is seen as “volitional, curiosity-based, discovery-driven, and mentor-assisted” and most effective at higher cognitive levels (Janik, 2005, p. 144). Furthermore, a neurobiological approach suggests that transformative learning: requires discomfort prior to discovery; is rooted in students’ experiences, needs and interest; is strengthened by emotive, sensory, kinesthetic experiences; appreciates differences in learning among males and females; and demands educators to acquire an understanding of a unique discourse and knowledge base of neurobiological systems.

A cultural-spiritual view of transformative learning (e.g., Brooks, 2000; Tisdell, 2003) is concerned with the “connections between individuals and social structures … and notions of intersecting positionalities” (class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) (Tisdell, 2005, p. 256). This perspective focuses on how learners construct knowledge (narratives) as part of the transformative learning experience. In particular, it appreciates a culturally relevant and spiritually grounded (holistic) approach, not solely a cognitive and rational emphasis, to transformative pedagogy. Its goal is to foster a narrative transformation—engaging storytelling on a personal and social level through group inquiry. Cross-cultural relationships are also encouraged along with developing a spiritual awareness. The teacher’s role is that of a collaborator with a relational emphasis on group inquiry and narrative reasoning, which assist the learner in sharing stories of experience and revising new stories in the process.

A race-centric view of transformative learning puts people of African descent, most often Black women, at the center, where they are the subjects of the transformative experience. Although as a non-Eurocentric orientation of transformative learning (e.g., Williams, 2003) it is in the early stages of theoretical development where race is the predominant unit of analysis with an emphasis on the social-political dimensions of learning. Like Freire’s emancipatory perspective the vocabulary associated with transformative learning is often not used.

Traditionally, African people have had systems of education that were transformative. Rites of passage and rituals are among the many forms Africans have created to nurture the consciousness of every member of society into a greater connection with the Self, the Community, and the Universe. (Williams, 2003, p. 463)
It is a conception of transformative learning that is culturally bounded, oppositional, and non-individualistic. Essential to this view is engaging the polyrhythmic realities—“the students’ lived experience within a sociocultural, political, and historical context” (Sheared, 1994, p. 36). In addition, there are three key concepts to fostering transformative learning: promoting inclusion (e.g., giving voice to the historically silenced); promoting empowerment (e.g., not self-actualization but a belongingness and equity as a cultural member); and learning to negotiate effectively between and across cultures. Fostering transformative learning is seen as a deliberate and conscious strategy to employing a political framework (e.g., consciousness raising, activism, and providing a safe learning environment) with the expectation that it “may be necessary for one to undergo some form of self-reflection and transformation in order to teach transformation” (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006, p. 55). This conception of transformative learning has the potential to address some of the concerns raised by Brookfield (2003) by foregrounding interest of Black students, instead of as the “other” or as an alternative point view from the dominant view.

A planetary view of transformative learning takes in the totality of life’s context beyond the individual, and addresses fundamental issues in the field of education as a whole (O’Sullivan, 1999). The goal of transformative education from this perspective is a reorganization of the whole system (e.g., political, social, educational, natural world). It is creating a new story, from one that is dysfunctional and rooted in technical-industrial values of western Eurocentric culture, which gives little appreciation to the natural, to an integral worldview. This view recognizes the interconnectedness between universe, planet, natural environment, human community, and personal world. Most significant is recognizing the individual not just from a social-political dimension but also from an ecological and planetary dimension. Transformation is not only about how one views their human counterparts, but explores how we, as humans, relate with the physical world.

Key differences exist among the various views of transformative learning. Beginning with the goal of transformation, one of the most fundamental differences is that of personal or emancipatory transformation (e.g., self-actualization to planetary consciousness). Related to this difference is the emphasis on individual and/or social change. Those views that are more rooted in the individual (e.g., psycho-critical, psychoanalytic, psycho-developmental, neurobiological) give little attention to context and social change and their relationship to transformation. Where the individual and society are seen as one in the same (e.g., emancipatory, race-centric, cultural-spiritual), transformative learning is as much about social change as individual transformation. Another difference is the role of culture in transformative learning. The more psychologically centered models (e.g., psychoanalytic, psycho-developmental, psycho-critical, neurobiological) tend to reflect a more universal view of learning with little appreciation for the role of social or cultural differences. On the other hand, those views that recognize difference (social emancipatory, culturally relevant narrative, race-centric, and planetary), place a
much greater emphasis on positionality (e.g., where one’s “position” is relative to race, class, gender, sexual orientation) and its relationship to both the process and practice of transformative learning.

NEW INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Along with emerging alternative perspectives to transformative learning theory, research continues to flourish about the nature of transformative learning. In reviews of research (Taylor & Laros, 2014; Taylor & Snyder, 2012; Taylor, 2009), a number of findings have implications both about the process of transformative learning and how it can be fostered in the classroom. Even though most research continues to be situated in higher education settings, the focus has shifted somewhat away from the possibility of a transformation in relationship to a particular life event, to greater interest about factors that shape the transformative experience (e.g., critical reflection, holistic approaches and relationships).

Beginning with the construct “perspective transformation”, as previously discussed, it has been found to be an enduring and an irreversible process (Courtenay, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998). In addition, research further substantiates the relationship between action and perspective transformation (e.g., MacLeod, Parkin, Pullon, & Robertson, 2003). For example, Lange (2004) found a transformation in fostering citizen action toward a sustainable society to be more than an epistemological change in worldview; it also involved an ontological shift, reflective of a need to act on the new perspective. These studies along with others suggest that it is important for educators to provide opportunities for learners within and outside the classroom to act on new insights in the process of transformative learning. Without experiences to test and explore new perspectives, it is unlikely for learners to fully transform.

Second, there are new insights about critical reflection and its significance to transformative learning. In particular, they shed light on the nature of reflection, factors that influence reflection, indicators of reflection, joint reflection through peer dialogue, and factors that help explain non-reflection. For example, recognizing levels of reflection using categories developed by Mezirow (e.g. content, process, premise), Kreber (2004) concluded that when learning, in this case about teaching, teachers may need at times to begin with premise reflection—that is, being more concerned with “why” they teach than with how or what they teach. Premise reflection involves critically “questioning our presuppositions underlying our knowledge” (Kreber, 2004, p. 31).

Critical reflection historically has been seen as foregrounding rationality and overlooking the role of emotions (Mäki, 2010; Taylor, 2001). However, there exist a much more synergistic relationship between the physiological processes of cognition and emotion (Damasio, 2005; LeDoux, 1998). Traditionally critical reflection is where rationality assumes that decision-making, lacking of emotion, is the best available means for solving a problem. Contemporary research in the field of neuroscience reveals that “purely objective reasoning cannot determine what to
notice, what to attend to, and what to inquire about” (van Woerkom, 2010, p. 348). Individuals are often encumbered with too much information when attempting reasoning therefore it is emotions that help the individual manage this information determining the value of the almost limitless choices available in making a decision. Emotions can be understood as “guiding the process of reasoning—or distorting them, depending on the describer’s assessment of their appropriateness” (de Sousa, 1991, p. 197). The relationship between critical reflection and emotion is further established through the recognition of empathy. Empathy has been argued to both enhance an individual’s ability to critically reflect and manage emotions (Taylor, 2014).

Lastly, critical reflection seems to be a developmental process, rooted in experience. It begins to give credence to Merriam’s position that “mature cognitive development is foundational to engaging in critical reflection and rational discourse necessary for transformative learning” (Merriam, 2004, p. 65). For educators, these findings suggest the importance of engaging learners in classroom practices that assist in the development of critical reflection through the use of reflective journaling, classroom dialogue, and critical questioning. Furthermore, it also means recognizing that becoming more reflective is a developmental process requiring time and continual practice.

Third, research further substantiates the importance of a holistic approach to transformative learning in addition to the often-emphasized use of rational discourse and critical reflection. A holistic approach recognizes the role of feelings, other ways of knowing (e.g., intuition, somatic), and the role of relationships with others in the process of transformative learning. Dirkx suggests it is “about inviting “the whole person” into the classroom environment, we mean the person in fullness of being: as an affective, intuitive, thinking, physical, spiritual self” (Dirkx, 2006, p. 46). By engaging the affective, it provides “an opportunity, for establishing a dialogue with those unconscious aspects of ourselves seeking expression through various images, feelings, and behaviors within the learning setting” (Dirkx, 2006, p. 22). For practitioners this means actively dialoguing about the feelings of learners, in concert with reason, when fostering transformative learning.

Other holistic approaches recognize the importance of relationships with others when fostering transformative learning. It happens “through trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve mutual and consensual understanding” (Taylor, 2007, p. 179). Types of relationship found to be most significant to transformation are love relationships (enhance self-image, friendship), memory relationships (former or deceased individuals) and imaginative relationships (inner-dialogue, meditation) (Carter, 2002). In addition to the typologies of relationships Eisen (2001) identified a “peer dynamic” among successful peer-learning partnerships among community college teachers. This dynamic reflected a number of essential relational qualities: a nonhierarchical status, non-evaluative feedback, voluntary participation, partner selection, authenticity, and establishing mutual goals. Relationships foreground the
role of the “social” and transformative learning, highlighting that transformative learning does not happen in vacuum based on the insights of an autonomous learner, instead it is socially influenced, shaped, and accountable to others (Chin, 2006; Nohl, 2009; Jokikokko, 2009).

Fourth, there has been an interest in the lack of transformation among some individuals and barriers that discourage and inhibit transformation. The lack of change seems to be explained by a variety of factors. For example, in a study that explored how learners made meaning of their life histories via dialogue in an online graduate course on adult development, researchers found a lack of critical reflection among learners because “group members did not ask critical questions of one another or challenge each other’s assumptions. This lack of critique may have truncated the group process prematurely” (Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2006, p. 315). Another explanation for non-reflective learning is explained through learning preferences in use of reflective journaling (Chimera, 2006). Some learners who were classified as non-reflectors when their journals were analyzed were found to prefer talking about issues rather than writing them in a journal. Some did not see it as necessary to write their thoughts down and, therefore, did not see a need for journal writing. This lack of change on the individual level should remind educators that it is important to take time to know students as individuals, recognizing their preferences, and engaging a variety of approaches when fostering transformative learning.

Identifying barriers that inhibit transformative learning can also help explain a lack of change among students. For example, barriers include: rules and sanctions imposed on welfare women returning to work in a family empowerment project (Christopher, Dunnagan, Duncan, & Paul, 2001), the downside of cohort experiences where there is often an unequal distribution of group responsibilities and an emphasis on task completion instead of reflective dialogue (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001); and rigid role assignments (Taylor, 2003).

A response to learner resistance and barriers to transformative learning is for educators to develop an awareness of learner readiness for change. Recent research reveals that it is important to appreciate the role of life experience among learners and become more aware of learners who are susceptible to or who desire change. For example, life experience has been found to be particularly significant in online settings (Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, & Casey, 2001; Ziegahn, 2001). Greater life experience seems to provide a “deeper well” from which to draw upon and react to discussion that emerged among online participants.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Transformative learning theory continues to be a growing area of study of adult learning and has significant implications for the practice of teaching adults. The growth is so significant that it seems to have replaced andragogy as the dominant theoretical orientation of adult education, providing teaching practices grounded in empirical research and supported by sound theoretical assumptions. Also, as
previously discussed, there is an emerging presence of alternative conceptions of transformative learning, challenging scholars and educators to look beyond transformative learning as defined by Mezirow. These alternative perspectives offer fresh insights and encourage greater research in the area of transformative learning.

Despite the growth in understanding transformative learning, there is still much not known about the practice of transformative learning in the classroom. One area in particular is the student’s role when fostering transformative learning. What are students’ responsibilities in relationship to the transformative educator? Second, there is a need to understand the peripheral consequences of fostering transformative learning in the classroom. For example, how does a student’s transformation affect peers in the classroom, the teacher, the educational institution and other individuals who play a significant role in the life of the student? Furthermore, there is little known about the impact of fostering transformative learning on learner outcomes (e.g., grades, test scores). Definitive support is needed if educators are going to recognize fostering transformative learning as a worthwhile teaching approach with adult learners.

Finally, the ever increasing body of research and alternative perspectives should remind educators that fostering transformative learning is much more than implementing a series of instructional strategies with adult learners. Transformative learning is first and foremost about educating from a particular worldview, a particular educational philosophy. It is also not an easy way to teach. Wearing this title, or moniker, of a transformative educator “should not be taken lightly or without considerable personal reflection. Although the rewards may be great for both, the teacher and the learner, it demands a great deal work, skill, and courage” (Taylor, 2006, p. 92). It means asking yourself: Am I willing to transform in the process of helping my students transform? This means taking the position that without developing a deeper awareness of our own frames of reference and how they shape practice, there is little likelihood that we can foster change in others.

NOTE


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