Transformative Learning Theory and the Missing Focus: How to Enable Perspective Transformation through Communication

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Abstract: This approach focuses on the question how to challenge the learners' intrapersonal communication within his/her taken-for-granted worldview through (interpersonal) communication. This means not to focus solely on the question how learning leads to change, but also on how the adult educator is able to initiate and catalyze changes through communication.

Language as the Fundamental Structure of Humanity

Being an Adult Educator is an impossible profession. While we are trying to transform someone's world view or frame of reference, how Mezirow puts it, we have to realize sooner or later at some point that we are unable to gain access to the learner's mind. No matter what we do, our interventions are limited to communication. This implies fundamental pragmatic consequences: While we have construed a multiplicity of models and concepts on how the human psyche works, we have failed to realize that our main business is communication. First, we have to realize that there is a fundamental void in Transformation Theory concerning the fact that we as Adult Educators can solely operate on transforming the learner's inter- and intrapersonal communication. Too little is known on the pragmatics of human communication, pertaining to interactional patterns, paradoxes and pathologies in the context of transformative learning processes. There is also given too little attention on the principles of problem formation and problem resolution concerning the question on change. While Mezirow focuses on ideal conditions for fostering transformative learning, I am convinced that there is a need for a theoretical framework that would have to provide an insight on circular internal processes of how meaning is construed and reconstrued in respect to the individual's frame of reference. At the same time it has to possess practical dimensions on how the adult educator is able to challenge these processes while interacting with the adult learner. Therefore my thesis tends to challenge the learners intrapersonal communication within his or her taken-for-granted worldview through (interpersonal) communication. This means not to focus solely on the question of how learning leads to change, but also on how the adult educator is able to initiate and catalyze these changes through communication by learning how to balance stability and change in perspectives through dialogue. Based on Transformation Theory (e.g. Mezirow 1978, 1991, 1995, 1997, 2012; Mezirow & Associates 2000; Dirkx 1998; Taylor 1998, 2008; Kreber 2004, 2012) my model is built upon the intra- and interpersonal communication model mentioned above (Retzer 1994, 2004, 2006). The literature on theories of communication (e.g. Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson 2011; Watzlawick, Weakland, Fisch 2013) provides the bases for describing, explaining and evaluating these processes and gives us a greater insight on how the adult educator is able to initiate and catalyze these changes in learning processes. In addition to these models our approach has to provide an idea of how communication in the setting of adult education can be a balanced production of difference (Retzer et

al. 1997). Dimensions of change through communicating with the learner are going to be presented (Schumacher 1997).

1. In the beginning, there was the word… – On the meaning of language

According to the ancient Egyptians, the tongue is the repository of the mind. The tongue functions as a type of rudder, which enables humans to navigate through the currents of the world. As the fundamental structure of humanity, language has two fundamental functions; it not only enables movement through the world but also determines direction and purpose (Retzer 2006, p. 13). The peculiarity of language becomes clear at this point; it is a type of bridge that can connect the mind and communication. The self-reflexiveness of language results in social actions and individual ideas. In this socio-communicative process, language not only functions as an organ of perception for the abstract acquisition of a social reality but also actively changes this reality in terms of a circular process – which is one of the central assumptions of systemic theory. Because language has a central, constitutive function in our experience of reality, it has been chosen as the starting point. These relationships are highly relevant to adult education. Adult education is about helping people realize their potential and facilitating their learning. In order to prevent adults from being held back by self-imposed limits, (new) models are being sought to increase the likelihood of broadening their sphere of influence. Models originally used in the context of systemic theory and therapy could be utilized to guide adults in primary educational contexts. But what can be expected from the use of these systemic models in the sphere of adult and continuing education?

2. Communication as the exclusive exchange of stories and the problem of understanding

Knowledge of neurobiology suggests that during a conversation with another person, the main neuronal activity is dedicated to existing internal information in the form of a monologue in each communication partner. Internally stored life experience is decisive for the outcome of communicative exchange. In this context, transactional analysis also speaks of the concept of the *internal frame of reference*. The term *frame of reference* is also a core concept of Jack Mezirow's Transforamtive Learning Theory (Mezirow 1991; 2012). This framework or internal prior experience is like a pair of glasses through which we see ourselves and our environment – limited to the field of view (ibid., p. 27). From this background, it may be surprising that communication even takes place at all. At this point, we are concerned with discussing how words or language can act on perception. Here, Retzer distinguishes the spoken word, which influences the ideas of a listener. This boundary runs between the consciousness and the phenomenon of communication or, as Retzer formulates it, experienced life and narrated life (Retzer 1994, p. 16ff.; 2006, p. 14f.). Retzer understands human life as a communicative action.
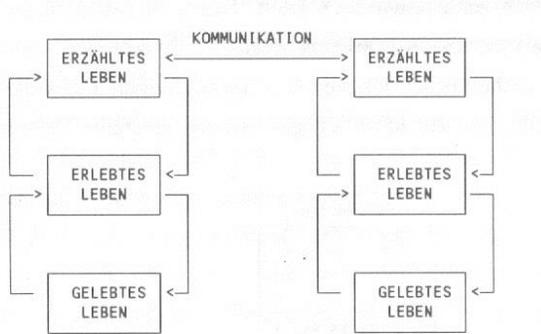
Figure 2 (Retzer 1994, p. 18)

Figure 1 describes communication as the exclusive exchange of stories. This model allows for the recovery of the concept of the inner frame of references as well as the findings of neurobiology and the ideas of life stories. Retzer conceptually splits these communicative events into three categories: he distinguishes life lived from experienced and narrated life (Retzer 1994, p. 11f.; 2006, p. 15ff.; Mücke 2009, p. 138f.). As outlined in the model, life lived refers to all organic, biological, and physiological processes and states. The life experienced is distinguished from the life lived: as psyche, consciousness, or perception (Retzer 1994, p. 9f.; 2006, p. 15ff.; Mücke 2009, p. 138f.). The experienced life is divided into three functional areas: the descriptive, the explicative, and the evaluative. Through descriptions, designations – and thus distinctions – are made. In a further step, explanations are brought forth by questioning cause-effect relationships and determining reasons for unfinished and completed actions along with the concomitant responsibilities or irresponsibilities of specific behaviours (Retzer 1994, p. 9f.; 2006, p. 15ff.; Mücke 2009, p. 138f.). In the last functional area, reviews are attributed to their own person or action patterns. Here, we are at the interface between experience and action or storytelling: "The language process within an individual may be viewed as a more or less continuous interaction between two parallel systems of behavioural organisation: sequences of central events ('ideas') and sequences of instrumental skills, vocalic, gestural, or orthographic, which constitute the communicative product" (Osgood 1990, p. 159). Through the language analytical theory developed by Osgood, emotions as evaluations of descriptions and explications can be collected along three binary dimensions in semantic space i.e. "strong – weak", "active – passive", and "good – bad" (Retzer 2006, p. 15). The three identified functional areas are folded into each other and thus produce implications for action. This may in turn lead to unfinished or completed actions. The latter are more likely if explanations and related evaluations represent the dominant feature of experienced life in a clear and unambiguous way (ibid., p. 16).

Describing, explaining, and evaluating thus constitute a theory of life, a personal narrative developed and developing in individual internal activity (ibid.) These so-called life stores enable the organisation and framing of events and experiences, which thus enable the interpretation and organisation of one's actions (ibid.). These personal life stories permit the experience of coherence and continuity. Here, subjective stories about one's own life i.e. why life has taken this course and not another represent a separate context of meaning for the narrator (ibid.). In this sense, these are fictional biographies. The author Max Frisch writes: "Sooner or later, everyone invents a story, which – often under tremendous sacrifices – is held on to for life" (Frisch 1975, p. 45). Because it is not possible to integrate the full richness of the lived experience of a life narrative, one also speaks of fictional biographies in this context (Retzer 2006, p. 16). Autobiographical memory thus has a triple role: remembering, forgetting, and the balance between the two. The theory of life created through selection, and which is continuously evolving, also refers to the primacy of the narrated present. Augustine adds here an interesting perspective too (Augustinus 2002). The past is always told in the present, a fixed past cannot be assumed. Many pasts must be discussed (Mücke 2009, p. 48). Mücke stated "In our mind, there is no one-way time: past, future and present structures determine each other" (ibid.). The theory of life varies depending on how and to whom one's own

life story is told as well as the current feelings, experiences, and thoughts of the person (ibid.). A variety of possible life histories can be constructed and told from the same experience. The selection process that selects the individual elements of experience influences the direction, course, and form that one's life has taken and will take. Each of these invented, narrated life stories precludes these distinct narratives. From a phenomenological point of view, this does therefore not exist. Either these narratives fit to the living environment or they do not. Here is the boundary between experienced life and narrated life (Retzer 2006, p. 17).

We come to the third phenomenon of human life, the narrated life. This refers to everything that takes place as a communicative action between people, including linguistic and non-linguistic elements. The term "performance" (ibid.) refers to the behaviour that is explained (by another) as a meaningful sign, thus becoming an element of the social system. The narrated life thus consists of communicative acts (Retzer 2006, p. 17). As illustrated by the arrows in Figure 1, all phenomena of human life interact with each other. Narrated and experienced life are relevant environments, which in turn cannot determine what causes the impulse in each system but rather only about which narrative or experiential patterns cannot be realised. As long experience and storytelling are not perturbed, they mutually confirm each other. If "all social systems (…) consist of communication and only communication" (Luhmann 2000, p. 49) and the understanding concept of Retzer is taken as a basis, in the sphere of activity of adult and continuing education, a linguistic environment must be represented, which enables the participants to experience themselves in this environment and to enter a learning discussion. In Figure 1, at the level of the narrated life, arrows are drawn between the communicating parties. This is because the concept of understanding is taken as a basis and assumes that narrated life can only be understood where it appears – in communicative exchange (Retzer 2006, p. 20ff.). As soon as people enter into a relationship and use language as a tool of communication, importance is attributed to their experiences. In exchange, each participant can acquire new stimuli, thus allowing self-referral. It the existing life theory and its experiences do not fit into this environment, new experiences – and thereby a new self-understanding – can be developed through the self-reflexive referencing of the past, present, and future. At this point, limits should also be drawn: because the narratives that are already outlined are perceivable by others, the impossibility of direct access to foreign experience must be assumed, and instructive interaction and communication must be rejected (Mücke 2009, p. 138ff.; Retzer 2006, p. 21ff.). Fritz Simon once again underlines the distinction from narrated life: "The psyche (as part of the experience life) is a phenomenon that can only be directly observed by a single person (in self-observation)" (Simon 1993, p. 103). In pedagogical practice, the understanding concept of Rezter can keep us from the arrogant attitude of knowing what is going on in my counterparts (the participant in adult and continuing education) and what they need to formulate it for themselves. Here, it is particularly a matter of the attitude of the adult educator i.e. that the responsibility to learn and discuss is always placed on the participant. According to the idea that needs are uttered and neediness is attributed, the tasks of an adult educator shifts. Instead of searching for and finding reality, new forms of negotiation may be discovered. The main concern is that through participation in communication, participants feel invited to develop a language environment within which they can find other constructions of meaning for their life stories. The decision about which life story is told to whom and the degree of openness to outer impulses is left up to the participants themselves. Not least, this requires that adult educators have an attitude characterised by openness and appreciation in the "moderating dialogue with people about their stories" (ibid., p. 20).

Outlook

My approach tends to the communicative dimension in Transformative Learning Theory. For exploring this perspective, we need to work with a model that reflects circular intrapersonal communication, which reflects on the circular internal processes of how someone realizes lived experiences through communication – as well as the interpersonal dimension describing the dialogue between the adult learner and the adult educator. Building upon that model we are able not only to describe and explain communication processes, but we possess practical dimensions on how the adult educator is able to challenge these (communicative) learning processes while interacting in a way that allows the adult learner to develop a new meaning perspective, that is less limited, more inclusive, discriminating and integrative of new (and old) experiences to expand the learners range of options. Transformation of experience (Jarvis), immanent in human learning is central to these learning processes. The trouble is that there is – to speak with Habermas – no *ideal speech situation*. Communication, no matter whether it is verbal or nonverbal, is always closely related to perception. And perception is not a passive process of just receiving what has been sent; on the contrary: perception is an active process of constructing the meaning of any form of communication. Perception is deeply influenced by e.g. the experience the receiver has made, by his/her education, cultural values, and role requirement. Therefore, any model working with communication has to take into account that communication is always both, circular intra- as well as interpersonal: it is not only between sender and receiver, but also always within the receiver who has to interpret the sent message against the background of his/her individual experience.

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