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Getting Transformation into Good Trouble: Making new spaces of possibility with community and in practice

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Reimagining Teaching and Learning: The Transformative Potential of Service Learning

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Abstract: Transformative learning, originally introduced to account for adult education, was then broadly applied and updated, and eventually reached schools and Universities. Teaching and learning practices emerged in the last decades that bear close affinities with transformative learning. Service Learning is one of the most interesting. It is defined as a service activity carried out by students, aimed at addressing real needs that are felt by the community. Service Learning shares with transformative learning not only an experience-centered epistemology, but also the central role of reflexivity: it is critical reflection on experiences that fosters change and personal development. Not by chance, Service Learning methodology makes explicit reference to reflective and transformative many practices and techniques. Reflexive thinking, in both service learning and transformative learning, is the process through which learners re-structure and re-interpret meanings. It involves critical self-evaluation, analysis of experiences, and reconfiguring of pre-existent knowledge and visions. Coherently pursued, Service Learning – like transformative learning – is loaded with deep transformative potential, touching upon some paradoxical aspects of formal education – aspects concerning control, power, and openness-closure of educative processes and contexts.

Key Words: Transformation, Teaching-Learning, Service Learning, Reflexivity

Transformative Learning: From Adult Education to School

Transformative learning is a model of learning developed in the 1990s by Jack Mezirow. The model's ambition is to describe genuine learning, and to provide a guide to set up and recognize learning situations that empower learners to question and change their own ways of seeing and thinking, while deepening their understanding of both their own experience and the world (Mezirow, 2000).

This model of learning, originally introduced to account for – and improve – adult education, was then broadly applied and updated (for a review, see, e.g., Christie et al. 2015). Indeed, driven by the unsettling challenges that are becoming more and more apparent in our societies (see, e.g., UNESCO 2017), transformative learning eventually reached schools and Universities, where it became a critical counterpoint to a model based on knowledge transmission. In these instructional contexts, transformative learning corresponded to an emphasis on learning-by-doing, and to the promotion of reflective skills and other meta-skills that would allow learners to keep learning in changing social contexts, and to be in charge of change, rather than suffer it. As Mezirow himself once summarized:

in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such

understanding is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking (Mezirow, 1997).

The evolution of educational culture is, of course, anything but linear, especially at the global scale. Yet, some trends can be identified. Many teaching and learning practices emerged in the last decades bear close affinities with transformative learning. While not stemming directly from it, they have similar goals, and often make explicit reference to transformative methodologies. Among these teaching-learning practices, Service Learning is one of the most interesting as we will argue below.

Service Learning and Transformative Learning

Originated in the U.S. several decades ago, Service Learning is now a hot topic in the international debate on education (see, e.g., UNESCO, 2021). It is defined as a service activity carried out by students, aimed at addressing real needs that are felt by the community; the activity is institutionally planned and integrated with the academic career, by being a context for application of knowledge and learning by doing (Fiorin, 2015; Mortari, 2017; Bornatici, 2020; Cadei e Simeone, 2021). Service Learning is indeed "a balanced approach to experiential education" in which "service and learning goals [have] equal weight and each enhances the other for all participants" (Furco, 1996, p. 3). Service Learning embraces direct community oriented experiences, as well as many forms of planning, training, elaboration and evaluation; it is an occasion for students to learn and develop social and professional skills, but it is also an opportunity for reflection and sensemaking (Cadei e Serrelli, 2021); it requires and favors the construction of a dialogue between school (or university) and community, while at the same time articulating learning with social responsibility and active citizenship.

Service Learning shares with transformative learning an experience-centered epistemology of learning and education, where real life, participatory activity is seen as an occasion to trigger a "reflexive conversation" (or "transaction") between learners and the context. The conversation unfolds through phases such as problem setting, connection with past experience, trial and error, reflection on action, and conscious development of new strategies.

Students actively participate in projects that provide a service to the community, while at the same time reflecting on their experiences and on the meaning of what they are doing (this critical reflection is central to service learning, as it helps students connect their service experiences with academic concepts and develop a deeper understanding of social and community issues).

Reflexivity is fundamental in both service learning and transformative learning, since critical reflection on experiences fosters change and personal development. Transformative learning is the process by which people reconsider and restructure their conceptions of the world in response to meaningful and disorienting experiences. This process involves deep critical reflection on one's beliefs, values, and perspectives, and leads to a substantial change in worldviews and behaviors. In service learning, reflexivity develops through the process of reflecting on encounters and service experiences in the community. Students examine their service activities, question their own perceptions and interpretations of experiences, and connect what they have learned in academic discourses. In this learning process, reflection is an action, not just a simple series of thoughts. This suggests that reflection cannot be separated from actions, but rather that actions themselves form the basis of reflection.

Reflexive thinking, in both service learning and transformative learning, is the process through which learners re-structure and re-interpret meanings. Reflexivity is an active process involving critical self-evaluation, analysis of experiences, and reconfiguring of pre-existent knowledge and visions. This process of critical reflection is essential for personal change and the transformation of perspectives in service learning and transformative learning.

Service Learning also makes explicit reference to transformative practices and techniques that must accompany experience in order to liberate its potential. These practices and techniques should support Service Learning in all fundamental phases – from definition of needs, to design, execution, monitoring and evaluation – and remain fluidly integrated with the activity. The repertoire of practices is vast (Striano et al., 2018), including writing practices (personal diaries, collective writing), listening (interviews, reading stories and accounts), displacement (role playing, vision of movies and other media products), visualizing (photos, videos), expressing (theater, painting, sculpture and all other artistic languages), bodily experience (individual, in group, in couples, under supervision), biography (reflecting and connecting with personal motivations and family history), case studies and many more practices can hardly be reduced to a summary. Narrative approaches and Student Voice movements were particularly emphasized in recent times (Cadei, 2017; Cadei & Alfieri, 2021). Methods and techniques that accompany experience should be relevant and appropriate to support the engagement of students, sharpen their ability to identify community needs, and help integrating the students' experience, academic curriculum and social responsibility.

The Transformative Potential of Service Learning: Reimagining Teaching and Learning

Service learning insists on integrating community service activity with academic learning objectives. In Service Learning, learning is meaningful, being a result of personal elaboration of knowledge. The process empowers thinking, meant a social rather than individual process:

> [thinking is] a process of dialogical, reflexive knowing, necessarily construed by relating knowledge and people in order to escape the shallows of individualist thinking. A life perspective is found not in stable containers protected by fixed and secure notions, but in the awareness of fragility of what we know, and in the ability of creating and managing relationships (Orsenigo, 2009, our translation).

There is an important link between service learning and transformative learning. Both modes of learning focus on direct experience and critical reflection as tools for change and personal development. But Service Learning, when coherently pursued, bears deep transformative potential for the proposing institution, too: its necessary institutionalization requires integration into the values, logics and processes of the school or university itself, with regard to its relations with territory and communities (Cadei & Serrelli, 2022). Moreover, the transformation proposed by Service Learning aims to eventually move students to overcome the status quo, think disruptively, co-create new knowledge, and contribute to communities. Service Learning is thus hardly compatible with control and standardization. This could be seen as a paradoxical mismatch between Service Learning and formal education. Nonetheless, just for that, the profound assimilation of the logic of Service Learning is considered urgent and necessary for "reimagining" education and tackling the challenges of our times (UNESCO 2017, 2021).

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