Article

Transformative Learning Reconceptualized: Integrating the Arts and Social Imagination

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Ted Fleming

Teachers College Columbia University, USA

Abstract: This paper reconceptualizes Transformative Learning (TL) by foregrounding the neglected role of the sociological imagination and the transformative potential of the arts. It critiques the prevailing psychological emphasis in TL theory and calls for a renewed focus on social structures, historical context, and imaginative engagement. Drawing on the foundational ideas of John Dewey, Maxine Greene, C. Wright Mills, Alfred Schutz, and Oskar Negt, the paper explores how the arts—especially literature, music, and visual art—support the imagination, empathy, and emancipatory action. Works such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *King Lear*, and *The Mill on the Floss* are analyzed to demonstrate how art reveals the dialectical relationship between personal experience and societal structures, fostering the imaginative re-visioning of possibilities. The concepts of rupture, typification, and in-between spaces are employed to deepen understanding of how learners can be facilitated toward transformative engagement. Negt's ideas of exemplary learning and "imploitation" are used to highlight how capitalist systems can colonize imagination, making its recovery central to education for social change. By integrating aesthetic experience with critical pedagogy, the paper argues that TL can reclaim its social justice roots and become more responsive to today's complex realities. The arts are presented not as mere enhancements to learning but as vital, dynamic forces capable of awakening wide-awakeness, fostering empathy, and enabling learners to imagine and act toward a more democratic and inclusive society. This rethinking of TL calls educators to highlight the imagination, as a change of direction from a highly rational critical reflection, as central to processes of personal and collective transformation.

Keywords: Transformative Learning; Sociological Imagination; Art; Dialectic; Imagination

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> Rationalists, wearing square hats,
> Think, in square rooms,
> Looking at the floor,
> Looking at the ceiling.
> They confine themselves
> To right-angled triangles.
> If they tried rhomboids,
> Cones, waving lines, ellipses-
> As, for example, the ellipses of the half-moon-
> Rationalists would wear sombreros.
> Walace Stevens, Six Significant Landscapes from *Collected Poems*, p, 75.

Many adult educators rely on art to prompt critical thinking or support critical pedagogy (Kokkos & Fleming, 2024) while others teach about or through art (Lawrence, 2022). Art and art education offers an alternative to the current preoccupation in adult education with more functional priorities and the lifelong learning agenda (Fleming, 2021a) that emphasizes technical knowledge, and learning skills that support the economy (European Commission, 2023). In contrast to these relatively new priorities, we have never been without art. John Dewey wrote "even in the caves, human habitations were adorned with colored pictures that kept alive to the senses experiences" of nature (1934, p. 7). Art is a way of "pointing out what is significant" in life (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 70).

It engages the emotions and exercises the imagination. I want to explore imagination and make connections between adult learning and the arts and in particular with literature.

Many people experience art in the great museums of the Western World (Gulla, 2018, 2022) where queues of visitors indicate the attraction of art in the popular imagination. But John Dewey argued against the "museum conception of art" because it separates "art from the objects and scenes of ordinary experience" (Dewey, 1934, p. 6). The tourist gaze, Maxine Greene (1995, p. 31) suggests, is like conformity to the "norms of conventional admiration." Art is not always in a museum and captures a wider range of creative forms.

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1996) explores highly dystopian political possibilities offering insights about how the world may be today. It can be transformative to explore, through fiction, imagined experiences of women in a male-dominated world. Such creative works can inspire critiques of oppression and help imagine and make connections between social systems and individual experience. Critical reflection requires imagination.TL requires both.

Music also has the power to transform. Connecting emotions with the intellect, and name the world (Freire, 1972). From coping with COVID-19 (Hernandez-Ruiz, 2022) to enhancing life of dementia sufferers, as evidenced in Peter Alheit's (Smilde, Page, & Alheit, 2014) research, music is vitally important in life. Bruce Springsteen (2016) eloquently states the importance of music in his autobiography. Of Bob Dylan he says: "Dylan had deftly melded the political and personal in a way that added resonance and power to both. I agreed the political is personal and vice versa" (2016, p. 327). He continues (2016, p. 294);

> In my writing I was increasingly interested in the place where 'This Land is Your Land'
> and 'The River' intersected, where the political and personal came together to spill clear
> water in to the muddy river of history…. I thought perhaps mapping that territory, the
> distance between the American dream and the American reality, might be my service….I
> hoped it might give roots and mission to our band…

I am interested in the connection between the personal and the political. Music and the arts play a prominent part in articulating critical perspectives and supporting social change. Many protest movements for social change have their own music.

Art helps to make things significant and plays a role in human evolution (Dissanayake, 1988). Education has an interest in critical pedagogy that has made a clear option for a form of critical and highly rational investigation that is sometimes challenging for many people. In the process, the imagination, and in particular the sociological imagination, has been neglected. This is an opportune moment to balance the agenda to focus on the sociological imagination as it informs critical pedagogy.

The Plan

This paper explores the theoretical background of the sociological imagination. TL is redefined as a *pedagogy of social imagination* (Fleming, 2018; Fleming, Kokkos, & Finnegan, 2018). The main allies in this paper are John Dewey (1934) and Maxine Greene (1973, 1988, 1995) - classical American philosophers of education who provide a foundation for understanding how art interacts with sociological imagination. Their contemporary relevance for TL is assessed based on their history of working with the arts as an access route into imagining sociologically. I rely on C Wright Mills (1916-1962)and Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) for whom the sociological imagination was a core concept of their sociological thinking. Remarks are made on the transformative pedagogy of the critical theorist Oskar Negt - a recent German scholar of the social imagination (Fleming, 2022a). The paper concludes with practical ideas and reflections about how the sociological imagination and the arts, as in literature, might reinvigorate TL.

Transformative Learning

Mezirow relied on the psychological imaginations of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Herbert Fingarette, Roger Gould and others for the development of TL and also on the sociological imaginations of Karl Marx, Jürgen Habermas (Murphy & Fleming, 2010) and Paulo Freire. The psychological imaginations has had the most influence on TL and the sociological imagination may have been neglected. Finnegan implies that TL (Hoggan, et al., 2016, p. 49) may have underplayed the importance of the sociological imagination in what Mezirow borrowed from Habermas (p. 59). This may have caused relatively low levels of work undertaken by TL scholars on "social justice", and on connecting critical sociology, political philosophy and social class with TL (Finnegan, 2023, p. 127). Many scholars have explored the aesthetic experience, including Adorno (1977), Brookfield & Holst (2011), Butterwick & Lawrence (2023) and Marcuse (1978). This paper - reclaims the potential of the arts for the sociological imagining - and reintegrates the sociological imaginations of Mills and Schutz with TL in order to progress the development of TL in areas previously neglected (Fleming, Kokkos, & Finnegan, 2019). Though aware of Schutz and Mills, Mezirow did not integrate their work on the sociological imagination with TL. These allies are selected even in the knowledge that the concept of sociological imagination is contested in sociology (Palmer, 2022).

The Sociological Imagination of C Wright Mills

For many C Wright Mills is the originator of the concept, sociological imagination. It means a study of the historical context of social events with regard to the meaning those events for the individual's inner life. It takes into account "how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions" (Mills, 1959, p. 5). Sociological imagination connects individual experiences and people's problems with broader structures of society. In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) understands that "neither the life of the individual - nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (p. 3) and we only know our own chances in life by "becoming aware of those of all" (Mills, 1959, p. 5). Biography and history (of a society) are grasped and connected by the sociological imagination thus allowing us to "shift perspective from the political to the psychological" (Mills, 1959, p. 7).

This connection is important for TL as one phase in the process involves making connections between one's problems and broader social issues. Having over used the psychological imagination (which has been the case in TL) the solution is not to abandon it, or only use the sociological imagination, but to integrate them. The second phase in Mezirow's TL involves making connections between one's individual problems (troubles) and (social) issues; thus providing an opportunity to integrate the sociological imagination of Mills with TL. This points to a way of addressing critiques of TL that suggest, and convincingly argue, that TL has an inadequate concept of the social (Fleming, 2016; Fleming, Kokkos & Finnegan, 2019). Social science must include "both troubles and [social] issues, biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations" (Mills, 1959, p. 226).

Mills (1959, pp. 195ff) outlines how "intellectual craftmanship" is required to integrate the sociological imagination in studying reality. He intended to keep the "imagination spurred" (p. 211) with a "playful mind" (p. 211) and a fierce drive to make sense of the world (p. 211) and "release the imagination" (p. 215). Mills (1959, p. 186) describes the work of social scientists:

What he ought to do for the individual is to turn personal troubles and concerns into social issues and problems open to reason - his aim is to help the individual become a

self-educating man [sic], who only then would be reasonable and free.

The Sociological Imagination of Alfred Schutz

Mezirow (2003) relied more often on Schutz, quoting him in at the 5th TL Conference at Teachers College in 1979. But Schutz has not had an impact on TL, and is rarely referenced at any of the 15 Transformative Learning Conferences. Schutz, like Habermas is an important contributor to the development of the concept of *lifeworld.* Schutz defined it as the preconscious and taken-for-granted presuppositions, and understandings that strongly influence how reality is experienced (Schutz,

1970) including the linguistic and cultural constructs within which reality is interpreted (Fleming, 2022a). The system subjects the lifeworld to a "sociopathological form of *internal colonization*" (Habermas, 1987, p. 305). For Mezirow it refers to "the prevailing paradigms or collectively held sociolinguistic meaning perspectives" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 161) and to uncritically accepted frames of reference and unquestioned assumptions that inform thinking and actions.

Wildemeersch and Leirman (1988) applied the concept to TL. Citing their work, Mezirow (1991) refers to the possibility of introducing a sociological dimension to TL. He (1991) cites Wildemeersch and Leirman referring to the process of transforming problematic frames of reference, influenced by factor in the learner's life including "autobiography antecedents, gender race and class differences or educational elements" as well as "sociological aspects related to the educational process" (Wildemeersch & Leirman, 1988, p. 22). Mezirow calls this an unexplored "provocative observation" (1991 , p. 162), yet, declines his own invitation to explore this sociological dimension. The lifeworld (frames of reference) is transformed in TL.

Schutz (1967) uses the concept of *typification* to describe how in the process of meaning making, people are categorized in order to better understand them. Typifications act as form of *recipe knowledge* or handy unquestioned projections onto others as to how we perceive them. For Mezirow, our ways of typifying are unquestioned sets of meanings that make sense - until they do not. Typifying uses imagination to abstract from reality. We make meaning by taking for granted our beliefs in the world¸- by the "suspension of doubt" (Schutz, 1967, p. 229). We are always pre-acquainted with the world through socially given meanings as a "stock of knowledge at hand", that is "biographically determined" (Schutz, 1967, p. 247). Schutz describes these as a set of "socially approved set of rules and recipes for dealing with reality" (1967, p. 34) and are the "sediment of previous experiences" (p. 33). They are open to change in TL.

The sociologically imagination also involves *bracketing.* We put in brackets "the doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise than it appears" (Schutz, 1967, p. 46) requiring an active sociological imagination. Bracketing (of doubt) in TL involves holding some "beliefs in abeyance in order to allow ourselves to access an experience from outside our usual frame of reference" (Mezirow, 1991, 149). Again, TL has not integrated these insights and the sociological imagination escapes attention of TL scholarship.

Other concepts from the sociology of Schutz (1967) have been part of the development of TL by Mezirow include *role taking* (the ability to see the self through the eyes of others) and *multiple realities* (the experience of being able to interpret experiences from different perspectives). Mezirow (1979) suggested that multiple realities were suggestive of frames of reference or provinces of meaning (Schutz, 1970), but never identified them as involving a sociological imagination.

For the purpose of this study, Schutz (1945, p. 571) sociology includes a concept of *dialectic thinking* that is also neglected in TL scholarship. Dialectical thinking involves a dynamic relationship between individual actors and social structures; between objective reality and subjective phenomenon; between structure and agency (Fleming, 2023). We can now assert that personal problems, and disorienting dilemmas, are necessarily connected dialectically to broader social issues. If this dialectic connection between the personal and the social is ignored, we misunderstand both individual problems and their social contexts (Fleming, 2014) and indeed TL itself. For instance, TL involves making connections between one's own individual problems and broader social issues. That connection is dialectical and as a result other phases of TL must be reimagined (Fleming, 2024b).

The political is personal; connected dialectically (Fleming, 2022b). The actions one takes as the essential final phase of TL are now identified as dialectically interconnected actions at personal and social levels. This requires that one perceives how internal oppressions and external injustices operate dialectically; that actions supporting social change have a dialectical relationship between personal transformation and social change. This critical reconstruction of TL moves it toward a critical theory of adult learning. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) describes how multiple disadvantages are compounded in a complex web of discrimination termed intersectional. If we apply the concept of intersectionality to TL this allows us to at least postulate that in addition to the dialectical connections

between individual and society, there may be, in addition, an intersectional impact. I suggest the term *intrasectionality* may describe the internal dimensions of the dialectical relationship. This fits with the concept of imploitation utilized by Negt.

Oskar Negt: Sociological Imagination for Transformative Social Change

Oscar Negt (1934-2024) was a critical theorist in the Frankfurt School tradition (Langston, 2024) and his first book (1971), *Sociological imagination and exemplary learning*, provoked considerable discussion in European workers' education circles. He asserts that individual experience cannot be properly understood unless it is seen in dialectical relationship with the social environment. Without the dialectical relationship between individual experience and social contexts each is misconstrued. Negt (1971, p. 27) describes his teaching activity as exemplary learning and he states that teaching must involve a sociological imagining. He organized instructional materials addressing workers' interests and class consciousness with a view to supporting emancipatory actions. This confirms the position articulated above that disorienting dilemmas (and other phases of TL) are more complex than Mezirow's version (1991) and these connections are absent in TL literature. There is an imperative to discontinue the false dichotomizing of the social and personal in TL. Uniquely, among critical theorists Negt, and his movie-making colleague Alexander Kluge,[1] present teaching materials and instructional methods as part of their pedagogy of the sociological imagination (Kluge & Negt, 2014).

Kluge and Negt state that neoliberalism subverts our inner resources and our imaginations have been compromised. They call this process, quoting Bertolt Brecht, *imploitation*. Kluge and Negt (2014, p. 445) are clear about how this process operates in the inner world: "Since the object of exploitation is put inside them, they are, so to speak, victims of 'imploitation' (*Einbeutung*)". This prevents understanding the real conscious experience of oppression and how systems undermine "workers' imagination" (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 35). Imagination is the "productive force of the brain" (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 37) that is neglected and "barricaded into the ghettos of the arts, dreaming, and the 'delicate feelings'" (p. 36). In typically expressive language they describe the undermined imagination as the "vagabond, the unemployed member of the intellectual faculties" (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 37). According to Kluge and Negt when imagination, the productive force of the brain, is divided (imploited), an obstacle is erected against emancipatory actions. The imagination cannot imagine and an important tool for the "self-emancipation of the workers" is lost (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 37).

Their original concept of *obstinacy* describes an extraordinary capacities to not only survive imploitation, but to have the potential to remain awake, alert (Kluge, & Negt, 2014). Mills (1959, p. 197) and Schutz (1967, p. 212, 1970, p. 72) also wrote that the sociological imagination is linked with being "awake". The struggle for recognition, the resilience of learners and the drive for TL are multiple expressions of a deeply engrained posture of obstinacy and of being wide awake (Fleming, 2024a).

Negt's pedagogy of exemplary learning involves, thinking independently, dialectically, systemically, with sociological imagination, utilizing critical reflection. As a teacher of adults he engaged in analyzing and bringing into awareness historical processes of how learners' interests are defined for them and how power is experienced, so that learners can learn about their roles in society (Negt, 1973). Negt emphasizes understanding "workers existence as a social problem" (Negt, 1971, p. 4), involving learners analyzing social situations, in order to understand the causes of these situations and informing actions to change them. Negt and Kluge (2016) assert that experience is the most important thing that "workers actually produce" (p. xlviii). Negt's exemplary learning involving an exercise in sociological imagination and facilitates re-imagining the lived experiences of learners and submerged possibilities that arise through exemplary learning. Negt goes beyond views

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[1] I follow the order in which their names appear on their various co-authored publications, e.g., Negt & Kluge, (2014)

of education that emphasize personal growth that may lead to fitting into the social structures of the world (Negt & Kluge, 2016). His education goes beyond EU policy mantras of skills for all and lifelong learning; goes beyond the teaching of competencies, that dominate the lifelong learning and skills for all agenda of the EU (European Commission, 2023).

The literature of TL does not often focus on teaching materials that facilitate TL. Kluge and Negt (2014) published an archive of pedagogical methods for facilitating the exploration of how things could be different. Using literature, science fiction, satire, fairy-tales, film, documentaries and a range of innovative materials they support the critical intelligence curiosity and sociological imaginations of learners. Though these materials are complex and require study and reflection they reflect the depth of the challenge involved in facilitating TL.

In contrast to TL's rather tame political interest, Negt's exemplary learning, when integrated with TL, helps encourage TL toward social and political arenas. Negt provides a framework for historical and material interpretations of subjectivity that are produced by capitalist systems and a source for a new more just and caring society. This learning requires sociological imagination. All our allies (Mills, Schutz, and Negt) are aware that social change is difficult, involving what Kluge (2017) calls in his book title (quoting Weber), a slow and powerful *Drilling through hard boards*. This is a rare and consequential excursion into adult learning theory and practice by a scholar linked to the Frankfurt School.

The Sociological Imagination of Maxine Greene

Maxine Greene's philosophical position was built on the ideas of Schutz and was the most explicit philosopher of education addressing the arts, learning and the sociological imagination (Gulla, 2022). She called her research centre at Teachers College, The Centre for Social Imagination (Ayers, 1995). Public spaces are part of the American way of overcoming individualism when people could "come together in village squares and meeting halls and articulate their concerns in such a way as to constitute a live, consequential public sphere" (Greene, 1988, p. 27). In pursuit of freedom, she imagined such public spaces as "in-between" spaces where freedom could be imagined, practiced, lived and actualized. Strongly influenced by Dewey (as was Mezirow) her important concept of "in-between" involved transcending the worn-out dualisms of public and private, the self and others and what is from what ought to be. Thinking, collaborations, discussions and exercising power together allow what she called "reaching beyond" the individual (1988, p. 12). Though Greene critiqued the failure of educational thought and practice that faced "hollow formulations" and "mystifications" and "fundamentalisms" she proposed a "praxis of educational consequence that opens the spaces necessary for the remaking of a democratic community" (1988, p. 126). She wrote repeatedly about the connection between the arts, imagination and their essential role in becoming wide-awake. The missing space is an "in-between" (p. 116) space bridging the individualistic and dominant philosophy with the common or shared world that is required for human flourishing and freedom. In poetic prose she identifies a sociological imagination required to work in those in-between spaces that bridges the gap between oneself and those who are (perceived to be) unlike oneself. The in-between space allows for empathy, a space to repair, renew and reimagine a more inclusive future.

For Greene the social imagination is the ability to change the focus of attention from oneself to community, from the individual good to the common good. Working together on shared projects (in classrooms) may provide opportunities to imagine the other, the opposite, as sharing a common element and even shared initiatives and goals for their lives so that possibilities may arise and be imagined about living and transforming the current divided world. This awakening of the social imagination is fundamental for Greene.

The "in-between" world is imagined, for Greene, through art which awakens the possibility of a better world. The arts expose the engaged imagination to new points of view and perspectives that prompt thoughts about how things could be different. These imagined possibilities may turn to action, heal fractured relationships and awaken the learner to the potential of a different society. Greene's language is more direct when she asserts that it is only by means of education "that

individuals can be provoked to reach beyond themselves in their intersubjective space. It is through and by means of education that they may become empowered to think about what they are doing" (1988, p. 12). Of course, the outcome in "collective action" (Greene, 1988, p. 125) gives "freedom a concrete existence" in people's   lives (Greene, 1975b, p. 4). Nothing is more strongly stated than the urgency to "break with the mechanical life, to overcome their own submergence in the habitual" (1978, p. 46). This is a form of becoming themselves and turning their attention from what is actual to what is potential, always requiring a sociological imagination. It may break through what Greene calls "the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" (1973, p. 183). Quoting C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 215), Greene (1995) asserts that engagements with art "release the imagination" and work toward "wide awakeness" (1995, p. 50). Greene looks to the arts as the best way of exploring and valuing multiple realities. This is the core of her educational philosophy with a transformative intent (1995) – and from conversations with Maxine Greene this was her clear understanding of TL too.

Greene defines the sociological imagination as the capacity to invent visions of what ought to be. We are always in a dialectical process of developing. Imagination reveals hidden possibilities, and allows us catch a glimpse of what is not yet, but is possible. When we, either as teachers or learners, understand how experience is influenced by social structures, there emerges the possibility of what Maxine Greene calls (1995) - quoting Schutz – breaking through the inertia of convention when people "are enabled to explain their 'shocks' and reach beyond" (p. 39). Such a pedagogy, Greene continues, "offers life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light" (1995, p. 133). These moments help engage the   sociological imagination in the process of social transformation (Negt & Kluge, 2016) and TL.

John Dewey: The Case for Exploring Art

For Dewey, art conveys to others messages that stimulate reflection on what it means to live purposefully. Engaging with art prompts reflection with an eye toward the future - to a way of life that is fair and just and, more democratic. Art is the "most complex expression of longing and aspirations of a society" (Dewey, 1934, p. 105). This is Dewey's most definitive statement about the power of arts; works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man [sic] that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience (1934, p. 105).

For Dewey (1934) art is the launching pad for changing society. It provides a compelling vision that there are multiple perspectives and realities that enliven educational philosophies.

Art helps query the unexamined life. "Philosophy is said to begin in wonder and end in understanding. Art departs from what has been understood and ends in wonder" (Dewey, 1934, p. 270). Dewey railed against "complete uniformity" as when experience becomes "routine and mechanical" (1934, p. 272). Dewey knew that in busy lives there is a danger that "we drift" (1934, p. 40) and believed that when experience becomes "slack…that it is not an experience" rather "experiences are anesthetic" (p. 40). The "humdrum" and the submission to the "conventional" are real enemies of art and of the imagination needed in order to be alive in society (Dewey, 1934, p. 40). Art sharpens awareness in a way that is akin to the critical consciousness of Freire, the wide-awakeness of Greene, and the transforming of experience of Mezirow's TL.

Art has been the subject of much reflection among early critical theorists (Adorno, 1977; Marcuse, 1978) it has received less recent attention by Habermas and Honneth (Fleming, 2011, 2022b). However, Honneth (2023), in a comment on Seel and Schiller, identifies two important dimensions of art. Firstly, art has the task of "bringing to our attention the undiminished complexity of an object's qualitative properties" as it brings us closer to knowing objects in their "conceptually incomprehensible complexity" (Honneth, 2023, p. 64). Secondly, he continues, art has the ability to challenge our usual ways of thinking. It "playfully melts away or makes fluid" [spielerischen

Verflüssigung]² our fixed ideas and interpretations, putting us in a state where we are open to new "playfully imagined possibilities" including "the freedom of self-exploration" or self-development (Honneth, 2023, p. 66). This allows us (playfully) experiment with different perspectives and explore our identities more freely (p. 64). Honneth (2023) confirms the power of aesthetic experiences to underline the complexity of reality; its ability to support open-mindedness; and as a way of facilitating self-discovery, exploring who we are - playfully.

Art as an experience

For both Dewey (1934) and Dissanayake (1992) reconstructing or transforming experience is the most important kind of learning. When we look at Picasso's *Guernica* and see the broken weeping women with dead babies and become aware of the tragic experiences of those mothers and of mothers today, then art becomes an experience. If we can, with Picasso, imagine these scenes, we can also imagine Ukraine today, or Gaza or other places and events, resulting in an increased ability to imagine a better world - a world in which there will be no more wars that make women scream and weep like that - no bombs, no dead children. To open eyes and ears and imagination to art helps us to hear the deeply held desires within each person that a better world is possible (Greene, 1995). Such art may elicit empathy, indignation, and prompt the struggle for social action. Even the most violent stories told through art are often conveyed to the viewer in the most non-violent ways, which may be what Dewey means when he calls art "the beauty parlor of civilization" (1934, p. 344).

There are exceptions, when art conveys the world in a brutally realistic way. I am thinking again of *King Lear* or the movie *Trainspotting* (Figment Films, 1996). Art has the ability to take ordinary objects and present them back to the viewer as a question – and so transformations may begin. Events (sometimes ordinary) and feelings are expressed by the artist and the viewer, who is also familiar with such experiences, may enter onto the bridge created between artist and viewer. This is an in-between space and a bridge is a really useful image of an in-between space. Art can expose destructive behaviors and invite dialogue and prompt questions.

Even today, at times of mass migrations to Europe and America, artists can elicit empathy for those who must leave home and make long and risky journeys with hope and dreams. Khaleo Housseini's *Sea Prayer* (2018) helps imagine the hopes and dreams of a father who is migrating with his son to create a better life. The boat journey they must take is an in between space and there the father allows us share his fragile dreams and hopes for his son. *The Great Migration* series of Jacob Lawrence (2015) at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) tells stories of migrating African Americans from the US south to northern and western cities beginning during World War I. Lawrence distils the stories of millions into intimate vignettes (Gulla, & Sherman, 2020). Through art people can participate in understanding and   shaping change in society. For both Dewey and Greene such engagements broaden awareness of how things are, and, through imagination, limitations are brought into focus and addressed. Such "limit situations" may motivate change (Freire, 1972, p. 71).

Dewey and Greene's engaging with art and Mezirow's TL have in common the shared expectations that learning is grounded in experience and involves the transformation of experience. For Dewey, engagements with art involve the having of an experience and "the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing and transforming" (1916, p. 50) experience. Again, for Dewey, education is "the reorganization or reconstruction of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (1916, p. 76). For Mezirow, TL involves transforming experience (1991) which changes the meanings to which we have access in our interpreting of our experience. A transformed frame of reference is by definition more "inclusive, differentiated, permeable (open to other points of view), and integrated meaning perspective, the validity of which has been established through rational discourse…" (1991, p.7). TL involves ongoing transformations and learning that Dewey also acknowledges when he

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² Author's translation

asserts there is always "knowledge of something else" (1934, p. 122). Greene (1995, p. 43) writes about how incomplete our dialogues are in education "because there is always more to be discovered." "There is always more" (Greene, 1995, p. 131). We turn to expanding this concept of there being always more by exploring the Dewey idea of rupture.

Experience as Rupture

Disorientation or a disorienting dilemma is a key concept in Mezirow's theory but the roots of this concept in Dewey's work on rupture totally ignored in the TL literature. According to Morse (2011, p. 22), Dewey has a "philosophy of rupture." In making meaning Dewey asserted that "settled states are 'undone,' and this 'undoing' is the primary force in the meaning- making process" (Morse, p. 16). Rupture "is an important part of Dewey's philosophy" (Morse, 2011, p. 13), and meaning is achieved through disruptions. Dewey held that discord (rupture) brings a creative force to the pursuit of meaning (Morse, 2011). There is no such thing as a final settlement, a final definitive meaning because every settlement introduces the conditions for a "new unsettling" (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). Dewey is associated with the continuity of experience (Fleming, 2021b, 2022a), and parallel to this continuity he emphasizes the experience of rupture. Even when it is explored in TL (Cox & John, 2016; Scully-Russ, et al., 2022; Teen, Roberts, & Challies, 2020; Watkins, 2019) there is no reference to its origins in Dewey. TL is achieved through rupture, as in a disorienting dilemma.

Encountering a work of art may result in what Alma (2020, p. 34) calls "an experience" that can elicit a problematic response. In ordinary daily living, we only become aware of what Dewey calls an experience in "problematic" situations that are beyond our implicit understanding – beyond the scope of tacit knowledge. In that moment we may become   conscious of a rupture (Alma, 2020, p. 34). Experiences of art (Alma, 2020) confront us with rupture, as tacit frames of reference lose their balance in the attempt to make meaning of an aesthetic experience. This may prompt a disorienting dilemma. Alma (2020) insightfully asserts that "all art depends on friction with what we take for granted" and "breaking through our habitual ways of looking at the world" (p. 39). This echoes Adorno's comment about great art that makes "recipients lose their footing" (Adorno, 1977, p. 244). The idea of being off-balance may be a better way of stating the much over-used concept of disorienting dilemma.

Artists direct our attention to injustices; they offer a bridge between their feelings about the world and our re-awakening. Viewers may be forced to see possibilities that are denied by the wrongs of the world and in that experience, we may discover our own "social imagination" (Dewey, 1938, p. 293). To exercise the imagination in this way may enable learners to pick up the signals deep within us as individuals and as members of communities who know that a better world is possible (Greene, 1995). Picasso, in an interview with Malraux (1974, p. 110), spoke more forcefully about his painting;

You have to wake people up. To revolutionize their way of identifying things. You've got to create images they won't accept…. Force them to understand they're living in a pretty queer world. A world that's not reassuring. A world that's not what they think it is. Literature can have this impact too.

Not all art is such. Some is co-opted or uncritical and on occasion too abstract or inaccessible. Art can surprisingly, unlock the imagination of the far right too, and the German Nazi regime hollowed out the aesthetic principles of Western artistic traditions. A recent exhibition of 'Degenerate Art' at the Picasso Museum in Paris (Musée Picasso Paris, 2025) tells the story of "Entartete Kunst" [degenerate art] that was exhibited as a propaganda event in Munich in 1937. In seeking to control Germany politically and culturally, Nazi leaders restricted the type of art that could be produced, displayed, and sold. The 1937 confiscation of art by Joseph Goebbels (Propaganda Minister) led to an exhibition of so-called "degenerate" art; the art that the regime deemed unacceptable (degenerate). The works of 100 artists (e.g., Kandinsky and Klee) were presented in a setting designed to elicit the disgust of the public. By then many thousands, including Van Gogh, Chagall, and Picasso, had been declared degenerate (see full list: Free University of Berlin, 2022) and purged from collections and museums (US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025).

Nazi art aimed to steer the public's conscience in State-approved directions. Cinema was a more malleable medium and the Nazi cinema prescribed what viewers must think - a blueprint for conformity in thought and action (Adorno, 1977). The art being discussed here calls on the imagination to envision and think of ways of making lives better. We "look to art as a document, a catalyst, a transformative process that causes us to act morally and with care and kindness" (Goldblatt, 2006, p. 33).

The declared degenerate and famous German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) drew images and carved sculptures of closeness, care, and tenderness (Kearns, 1976). She depicted the impact of poverty, hunger, and war on the working class, illustrating the struggle against tyranny and oppression. Her subjects were war, slaughtered children, their parents and workers. She poses the question as to how to be a woman in a world at war, in poverty, and anguish. Her answer: with fear, intelligence, dignity, and courage. She "feels everything" (Kearns, 1976, p. 193) and cries out in order to prevent more deaths. The sculpture "Mother with her Dead Son" by Kollwitz is the center piece of the Tomb to the Unknown Soldier more recently called the Central Memorial to the Victims of War and Tyranny in Berlin (Marcuse, 1997). Critical reflection that involves empathy also requires imagination that leads to empathy. Picasso says it best: "I make paintings that bite. Violence, clanging cymbals…explosions…. A good painting - any painting - ought to bristle with razor blades" (Malraux, 1974, p. 139). Rupture is an under-appreciated and under-explored aspect of art, of experience, of TL and indeed of adult education.

Artworks have the power to prompt discussions about the situations exposed in them, and "reveal how democracy looks when rights are deprived" (Goldblatt, 2006, p. 20). The engaged viewer (or learner), relying on memories and experiences of their own, may suggest how insight can be achieved so that actions become imperatives. Minds and hearts are alerted to the work required; the work of learning. It should not be a surprise that so much art is on the side of democracy or at least suggests how it is threatened and what it promises as a possibility. Dewey, according to Goldblatt (2006, pp. 32-33), looks to the arts as a way to: to exemplify democracy: the artist makes available to everyone, modeling transformative processes based on personal and public experiences that society must embrace to foster the growth of its citizenry.

Transformative Teaching Through Art (Literature)

Adorno (1977), Dewey (1934), Greene (1995), Dissanayake (1988), and Lawrence (2015) agree in identifying some basic prerequisites for teaching through arts. Reading literature for critical purposes requires close attention to the text, the story, and the context. Honneth (2023) indicated, that art alerts us to the fine granular nature of human experience, emotions, the texture of human relationships and the multiple perspectives that fuel the narrative. Art requires an engagement with one's own emotional responses and thoughts; it requires the ability to make connections; and it must have the capacity to provide an experience. Literature as art must also provide opportunities to maintain the interest of the reader and provide an opportunity to connect the narrative with their own. This section proposes an engagement with literature as an example of engaging with art.

In working with literature as the art form to facilitate TL we remain mindful that literature as art has the ability to reveal the complexity of life in a granular and detailed way; and as narratives it allows us explore issues of identity and social change. For many literature can provide an immediacy and closeness to current issues, problems and interests in its narrative and story. The intent here is to focus on the reading of literature rather than the telling of stories.

Through history, and in particular through the history of the English novel, authors have cast a descriptive and often critical eye on important historical and social events in the author's society – and beyond. For instance, the origins of feminism rests on the early English novel. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* from 1740   sheds light on social issues of the time such as gender roles, false-imprisonments, and class barriers - as they were experienced at the time. The novel unfolds its story through letters and journal entries from Pamela to her parents. The novel supports perspective taking – part of the skill supporting TL (Mezirow, 1978). Through the imagination of the author and of the

reader the process is enhanced, emotions heightened and more acutely felt, and above all empathy may be experienced. I am placing some emphasis on early English novels to highlight how literature from the beginning was clearly a prompt for social descriptions, analysis and critique. There are blistering social critique in *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding (published 1749) and of English society in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (published in 1719) and in more obviously feminist positions in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (published in 1847). The list seems endless and continues to today's socially aware fiction writing. In addition there are the Great American Novels that, in the words of De Forest, did "paint the American soul" and capture "the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence" (Showalter, 2014). We have such a rich tapestry of fiction that continues the traditions of the early novels taking on new forms and indeed frequently increased the complexity with which we can imagine social and personal issues. *The Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* (Morrison), *The Color Purple* (Walker), *Capital* (Lancaster) and *The Mandibles* (Shriver) all are just reminders of a rich and accessible heritage. Who can forget *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee) or *The Great Gatsby* (Scott Fitzgerald)?

Such fiction can encourage dialogue and discussion, vividly paint current realities and frame future possibilities and even trigger disorienting dilemmas. Public debates can arise as a consequence and differing points of view on contentious issues can be raised and discussed. The ability to see from different perspective is practiced and encouraged in all great literature. Those with different values, customs, cultures and points of view can be presented in ways that heighten interest and empathy. This can lead, through imaginations, to thinking about future possibilities and actions. Literature can ignite critique in ways that are often less threatening than the real-life situations.

Shakespeare: *King Lear*

Shakespeare's *King Lear* takes the reader on a dystopian tour of relationships between members of his family and imagines what may become of those who choose power over relationships. Lear commands that each daughter confess their love and loyalty to him in return for inheriting their share his kingdom. Two daughters, Gonerill and Regan famously lie and cheat in order to convince Lear, and gain influence and political power. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, the king's favourite, cannot lie, is kind, loving and genuinely so. By not playing the game, she is disinherited and excluded not only from political power (land ownership) but also from   relationships in the family.

Readers, or theatre goers, might wish to explore the challenges of achieving power and holding it, as well as the interpersonal aspects of holding that power, along with the gendered nature of these issues. Lear does not build his kingdom on foundations of affection and attachments but rather on property, blind loyalty and dishonesty. It could be argued that each daughter inherited a version of his ruthless and toxic male power, though Cordelia chose the opposite rather than a similar version.

As the play ends, Cordelia remains as blameless as at the beginning, but with more feelings for her father. When finally, and tragically, all three daughters lie dead on the stage with their dead father, the king, the audience is left to wonder how to change within such realities. How might one relate today to toxic expressions of power? This question can be posed for individuals in families, in groups; in organizations; at work; in society; and in universities who try to navigate current tensions between freedom and political agendas. In real world situations, where toxic leadership seems to be increasingly immune to change, how can we survive? How can justice, care and fairness flourish? The play helps us confront complex human emotions and social issues, and foster a deeper understanding of the human condition. Authority can be questioned, power exposed, identity explored, social structures examined, as literature so effectively externalizes inner chaos. *King Lear* may facilitate the "going beyond" that Greene talks about. Going beyond broken relationships and violated trust, transcending intergenerational conflicts, exploring issues of inflated ego, mental health, vulnerabilities and fragilities of self. The chaos explored in *King Lear* seems to be a common experience today when there appears to be a breakdown in social order and authority; the exercise of irresponsible power; increased inequalities; authoritarianism; and the consequences of failures in ethical leadership.

Eliot: *The Mill on the Floss*

The famous English novel *The Mill on the Floss* (Eliot, 2015) was first published in 1860. It engages in a topical and lively debate about how national subjectivities or identities might be created which at the time was done mainly through male ownership of land and property that gave men their social and economic power. Eliot supported a different but less attainable possibility (Morrison, 2008) that suggested that identity could come from emotional and psychological connections to one's home place, its landscape, and its family relationships – and not from land ownership. This idea was more inclusive and equal and of course challenged the powerful land-owning class by showing how belonging and citizenship could be based on shared feelings and human connections, rather than on wealth or property.

Eliot explored the shift in thinking required of this new way of thinking. It involved acquiring what she actually called new "habits of mind" (Eliot, 1879, p. 279) with the focus on emotions and relationships - especially those formed in childhood. She held that children could developed their sense of self through their surroundings, their families, and the feelings connected to nature; sights, sounds, smells, and colours all contributing to this development. In the novel the tensions are between male and their possessive individualism and women's more inclusive values based on relationships.

Though published over 250 years later than *King Lear*, this theme is a shared in both works. In Lear the focus on land ownership tears families apart and damages identities. Family, people and place are devalued and destroyed. Eliot, on the other hand, believed that identity should grow from close emotional ties – rather from the ownership of land or property. Relationships and the natural world are essential to understanding who we are. This shifted the ground(!) under the male ruling class and proposed new understandings of social inclusion based on Eliot' forceful critique of land-based power. Rather than viewing property ownership as a prerequisite for citizenship, Eliot proposes that deeply rooted emotional connections to one's home landscape would foster a more egalitarian and inclusive sense of national belonging and self-identity.

Eliot argued for an escape from the gendered power of land ownership and replace it with, what she perceived (maybe not correctly), as the ungendered landscape of one's home place. Eliot at least attempted to imagine a more empathetic and connected society beyond property and class divisions. She made a strong attempt to imagine a more fair and compassionate society, one not divided by class or property.

For today's educators, Eliot's writings offer valuable prompts for discussion as her writings have an ability to "implicate" the reader (Wimmers, 2012, p. 23) and make us aware that "there are no insurmountable barriers between fictional worlds and ours" (p. 27). Her writing encourages students and teachers alike to think critically about how they see the world, become aware of their habits of mind and how their views are shaped. Literature like *The Mill on the Floss* and *King Lear* can prompt transformative thinking in the classroom and help learners reflect on their own beliefs and consider new, more inclusive ways of thinking and acting. It allows the traditional focus of TL on critical reflection to become softened by an emphasis on the development of the imagination and empathy.

Final Thoughts

Imagining things being otherwise may be "the first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed" (Greene, 1995, p. 22). Approaching art from the vantage point of one's own lived experience and active engagement, and relying on one's own empathy, we can begin to know in "ways that bring about change" (Greene, 1995, p. 68). To the extent that this is carried out using synergetic transformative teaching methods within a variety of learning groups, further possibilities suggest themselves, and as a result of debate and interactions it is possible to strengthen the ability of learners to create and share emancipatory insights and construct meaningful ways of acting. Working in this way requires, it seems, expertise in teaching.

It just may be, that students know that in their engagements with art, our hearts and minds, feelings and thoughts, our emotional and rational sides are integrated. In a world that values the disconnections of these human dimensions and where Dewey and Greene worked against these false dichotomies, this process is perceived as so dangerous. Using literature, especially science fiction, satire, fragments of literature, film and documentaries Negt encourages the dangerous thoughts of critical intelligence. The book by Kluge (1996) captures this aspect of pedagogy in its title: *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*. As teachers we must start somewhere. Even the teachers of young children can lay the foundations for a critical intelligence,   imagination and empathy. George Eliot makes the point for us.

> The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet, what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky, with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows, - such things as these are the mother-tongue of our imagination….

<div align="right">Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, pp. 41-42.</div>

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