Abstract

Is higher education capable of promoting learning for change? Can transformative learning nurture spaces for innovation in education for sustainable development? A call to action from saguf.
Mikroplastik, nein danke!
»Auf Plastik verzichten ist nicht nur gut für die Umwelt, es ist vor allem auch befreiend!«

Nadine Schubert
Sie kaufen möglichst versandfrei und meiden Plastiktüten? Super! Doch nicht immer ist Plastik auf den ersten Blick sichtbar, z.B. in Form von Mikroplastik. Wo es enthalten ist und was Sie dagegen tun können, zeigt Nadine Schubert - und präsentiert viele weitere neue Ideen für ein plastikfreies Leben.

Nadine Schubert
Noch besser leben ohne Plastik

DIE GUTEN SEITEN DER ZUKUNFT

Eine Hymne an die Wunder der Natur
»Nest ist ein Wort der Umarmung, das Vorstellungen von Heimat, Zuflucht und Erholung heraufbeschwört.«

Janine Burke

Janine Burke
Nest
Kunstwerke der Natur

DIE GUTEN SEITEN DER ZUKUNFT
Transformative Learning and Education for Sustainable Development

Keywords: education for sustainable development, liminality, normativity, transformative learning and teaching

A fundamental transformation of lifestyles and economic patterns is needed to achieve sustainable development, as currently proposed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Education has been called upon to support this transformation (WBGU 2011). The 2005 to 2014 UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) confirmed that ESD could enable us “to constructively and creatively address present and future global challenges and create more sustainable and resilient societies” (UNESCO 2017). Over the course of the last two decades myriad ESD initiatives have testified to the importance of integrating sustainable development into curricula.

Yet the jury is still out on whether ESD is a panacea for the world’s ills or is itself part of the problem. Critics suggest that it has succumbed to utilitarian and neoliberal discourses on education and sustainability, where growth paradigms dominate and nature is only valued for its use to humans (e.g., Huckle and Wals 2015). By contrast, sympathetic observers and practitioners argue that overcoming current obstacles and continuing to foster ESD requires new pathways in teaching and learning (Tilbury 2011). This is based on an understanding that we need transformative learning rather than only “conformative” and “reformative” learning (Sterling and Thomas 2006) – a challenge for educational policy at all levels.

Is higher (academic, professional, and continuing) education capable of promoting such learning for change? Can transformative learning nurture spaces for innovation in education for sustainable development? A call to action from saguf:

Transformative Learning and Education for Sustainable Development

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critical reflection, invite experimentation with new meaning perspectives, and finally lead to their assimilation.

In this view, transformative learning is a form of third order learning, implying a paradigm change triggered by the experience of liminality (an in-between state of ambiguity or disorientation, Land et al. 2014) with a disruptive or restorative element (Lange 2004). This leads to “the experience of seeing our worldview rather than seeing with our worldview so that we can be more open to and draw upon other views and possibilities” (Sterling 2011, p. 23). By contrast, first order learning refers to reproduction of knowledge and “doing things better” and second order learning to critical reflection and “doing better things”, mirroring Sterling’s (2011) differentiation between conformative, reformative, and transformative levels of learning.

Mezirow’s approach to transformative learning has been modified in reaction to his overly individualistic orientation and brought into dialogue with ESD. For Brookfield (2000) transformative learning ought to prompt reflection on prevailing relations of power and discourse, especially in view of contemporary capitalism’s value orientations. Freire (1970) also points to transformative learning’s emancipatory potential, where the interplay between action and reflection serves to identify and counter social inequalities.

As underlined by Sterling (2011), who has been at the forefront of mobilizing transformative learning for ESD, both Mezirow and Freire have influenced the current understanding of transformative learning, which “(...) involves a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-location: our relationships with other humans and with the natural world. It also involves our understanding of power relations in interlocking structures of class, race and gender, our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living, and our sense of possibilities for social justice, peace and personal joy” (O’Sullivan and Morrell 2002, p. 18).

Hence, while transformative learning is often presented as a mode of change on the part of an individual (albeit as part of society), the transformation to sustainable development (SD) clearly requires societal change. As a consequence, we should never lose sight of the interaction between individual and societal change, as there can be no societal transformation without individual transformation. By implication, any transformation of an individual’s values can lead to a corresponding shift of values in reference groups.

Does promoting transformative learning ultimately amount to more than good teaching? We argue that it does, for what the ESD context adds to transformative learning is a mutually reinforcing relationship, a goal and value orientation, and a decidedly social and constructivist conception of learning. The focus of ESD is on a process of collective awareness for engagement in concrete initiatives. Transformative learning for SD is thus participatory, integrative, and reflective (Singer-Brodowski 2016), and requires a restorative approach and a safe space for the learning process. The setting becomes the message and the values of SD need to be constantly negotiated and re-negotiated, which makes teaching and learning an enormous challenge.

Drawing on our professional experiences, we suggest that the challenge can be addressed in higher education, but we underline that fostering transformative learning in tertiary learning settings requires institutional change and the orchestration of liminality and mindful transforming learning and training environments.

**FIGURE:** Information alone does not lead to a change of behaviour.

Transformative Learning and Education for Sustainable Development: Conditions and Challenges

A recent assessment of SD at Swiss universities found some progress in transforming training environments (Akademien der Wissenschaften Schweiz 2017). For example, guidelines and coaching at the University...
sity of Bern help teachers realize that their understanding of science can safely be related to SD, without loss of objectivity (Herweg et al. 2017). In higher professional education, training courses for adult educators have promoted SD and transformative learning for several years (WWF 2015).

Nevertheless, Swiss higher education institutions are still far from enabling their students and researchers to become agents of change for SD. Most SD curricula and institutions are still far from enabling their students to perform autonomous critical actions.

Transformative learning: There can be no transformative learning without transformative teaching, which should include among other elements an emphasis on personal experience; inter- and transdisciplinary (Balsiger 2015); service-learning arrangements; self-organized engagement with knowledge, values, and emotions; and living labs. A role shift is also necessary. Teachers take on the role of coaches, facilitating learning and co-learning among students but also between students and teachers. The UNECE ESD Competence Framework (2011) highlights what educators need for teaching sustainability: holistic approaches, envisioning change, and achieving transformation.

Leadership for change. Whereas transformative leadership is shared among many actors, competences and knowledge for sustainability transformations are widely lacking. Even though SD policies in higher education exist all over Europe, professional training to develop institutional leadership and competences for transformative education rarely does (Mulà et al. 2017).

Transformative learning can enhance ESD because its very essence is to promote critical self-reflection, leading to different worldviews and to behavior change. The responsibility to ensure that such worldviews and behavioral change have a restorative foundation is ours, a responsibility that is at the heart of saguf’s mandate and activities.

References


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