

Manifesto

Learning for Transformation



Yuri Schmid 2020

Learning for Transformation

The manifesto contains four demands and corresponding core messages that have emerged from our broad and collective expertise, based on knowledge and practice. We have underpinned each of the core statements with arguments.

The authors of this version: Petra Biberhofer, Ruth Förster, Sofia Getzin, Clemens Mader, Marlene Mader, Helene Sironi, Sandra Wilhelm, Anne Zimmermann

1.

We all need to contribute to enabling transformations towards sustainable development.

2.

Cosmetic changes won't do: we need to be open to radical changes in the way we think, feel, and act. Individually and collectively.

3.

Transformative learning processes can and must be implemented everywhere in society.

4.

Learning environments and learning processes for transformative learning need to be shaped in a conscious and competent manner.

1.

We all need to contribute to enabling transformations towards sustainable development.

1.1 The world's crises require that we respond with massive changes and competent action.

Major ecological, social, and economic crises (climate change, loss of biodiversity, poverty, migration, pandemics, wars, etc.) are forcing us to react appropriately and shape our future with sustainable development as our compass. Business-as-usual is an impossible blueprint for the future. Instead, to achieve a sustainable future, we need massive adjustments and competent action. In our understanding, these are socio-ecological transformation processes that need to be shaped both locally and globally (Dixson-Declève et al., 2022).

1.2 Education for sustainable development at all educational levels needs to be readily available, including life-long learning.

Adjusting massively requires learning processes and radical changes in the ways we think and act, i.e. it requires transformative learning. This concerns all areas of life that trigger, accompany, and control learning. What we need is cooperation between all actors in formal, non-formal, and informal education, and a conscious turn of their attention to sustainability.

This requires Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), an understanding of education that fosters individual, societal, and organisational transformative learning processes in a holistic manner (UNESCO, 2020: #ESDfor2030; UNESCO, 2021: Berlin Declaration). Such learning opportunities should be accessible to all and take place at all stages of life, all life long.

2.

Cosmetic changes won't do: we need to be open to radical changes in the way we think, feel, and act. Individually and collectively.

2.1 A sustainable future implies radically questioning our certainties and values.

How we act and think and whether we can act more sustainably depends on our habits and convictions. Behind these are mostly unspoken and unconscious basic principles and beliefs, values, and norms, as well as our self-image, how we see our relationship to the world. “We learn and habituate a certain position regarding the world, a practical attitude towards the world that goes far beyond our cognitive “world view”, our conscious assumptions and beliefs about what exists in the world and what matters” (Rosa, 2019, p. 10). As a society, we need to become aware of these underlying, largely unconscious mechanisms, so that we can take responsibility and shape change.

Our basic principles and beliefs, our values and norms as well as our self-image and our attitudes are bundled in meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1997). These are based on biographical experience and knowledge and are socially learnt. Meaning perspectives have “... three functions: They impact on 1) our perception to guide us when interpreting reality, 2) in order to provide orientation for individual action and 3) ultimately to shape the identity of the individual” (Singer-Brodowski, 2016, p. 15). Meaning perspectives are therefore like a pair of glasses through which we view and judge the world. These glasses help us to make sense of experiences and take decisions. On the one hand, meaning perspectives are significant because they help us function and act in the world. On the other hand, they stabilise previous unsustainable acting and cannot simply be abandoned because of their important functions.

At the same time, meaning perspectives are never just individual: they are effective because they are shared and give us collective meaning as a community. Therefore, to act more sustainably, we must radically question them individually and collectively and change them if necessary.

2.2 Transformation means systems change and not stabilisation of the system.

What does “transformation” really mean? Transformation is a fundamental, irreversible, self-organised change of a complex system – such as we have in ecosystems, economic systems, or our society (Reißig, 2014) – and of the associated individual and collective meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1997). Ultimately, the actors are always individuals who are involved in interactions within the various systems. Transformation is therefore not cosmetic change in the sense of adjustments and thus stabilisation of a system; nor is it a change that can be easily controlled.

In the context of sustainable development, however, we do speak of a transformation that should be steered, insofar as it is oriented towards and actively strives for a normative model of sustainability. This orientation is a holistic vision that is anchored in a systems view of the world and the realisation that humans and nature are interconnected: the well-being of individual entities depends on the well-being of all others. The animate and inanimate also have their intrinsic value, which must be respected by all human beings (Lange 2012, Wahl 2016). We are thus moving away from an anthropocentric view of the world. However, the current behaviour of the majority of humanity is far removed from this vision.

2.3 A sustainable future is not compatible with the neo-liberal growth paradigm.

In the current global neo-liberal economic model with its growth paradigm and its individualistic and liberal understanding of freedom, the relationship between human beings and nature is predominantly anthropocentric. As a result, people see themselves as separate from the world and consequently instrumentalise and control themselves and the world (in the sense of human and environmental capital) with a view to fulfilling their own needs. According to this capitalist world view, natural resources are supposed to provide human beings with raw materials, and humans must earn access to them through labour. As a consequence, human beings are also instrumentalised, and needs are constantly recreated in order to maintain economic growth. This process is underpinned by the conviction that resources are infinitely available: if one resource becomes scarce, there will be another

Increasingly, however, “the insight is gaining ground that an orientation towards the growth-oriented path of Western societies is an obstacle to achieving the global Sustainable Development Goals and to promoting global justice” (Getzin & Singer-Brodowski, 2016, p. 33).

By seeing ourselves as marshals of the world, subordinating it to humanity, and believing that the availability of nature is subject to no limits, we lose our relationship to the world and thus jeopardise our own existence. In other words, we need to change our world view and self-image, and perceive ourselves as part of the world again, recognising planetary boundaries, respecting human rights and taking to heart the intrinsic value of everything animate and inanimate (Balsiger et al., 2017). We therefore need transformative counter-concepts to the growth paradigm; concepts that are oriented towards sufficiency, relationality, and the common good, for example.

3.

Transformative learning processes can and must be implemented everywhere in society.

3.1 Transformative learning enables us to challenge our certainties and values.

Instead of responding reactively to problems and correcting unsustainable developments after they have taken place, it makes sense to proactively tackle challenges with joint search processes and initiate a concrete and desired transformation. Sommer & Welzer (2017) coined the formula “transformation by design or by disaster”. We clearly prefer “transformation by design”. Such an anticipatory, creative, and collaborative approach to problem situations needs to be learnt, especially by those involved in the education system. Only transformative learning for a sustainable future makes it possible to bring about profound changes in individual and collective meaning perspectives and thus also in the way we think, feel, and act.

Transformative learning modifies both our self-image and our relationship to the world. According to Mezirow, two elements are indeed central to the transformative learning process: (1) the critical (self-)reflection of basic assumptions or meaning perspectives of others and oneself (Mezirow 2012, p. 85), and (2) the critical, non-violent dialogue in a collective, with the aim of making implicit assumptions explicit and evaluating them with regard to their functionality or relevance to interpretation and meaning-giving in concrete situations (Mezirow 2012, p. 78ff).

It is important for the transformative learning process to be able to experiment, i.e. to explore new meaning perspectives and to try out or train new ways of thinking, feeling and acting, in line with the awareness and search processes mentioned above. Transformative learning is not a short-term incentive, especially when it comes to tackling the causes of unsustainable development together and in all areas of society, instead of fighting symptoms.

3.2 Transformative learning at the societal and individual level are inextricably linked.

Transformative learning of an individual always takes place in relation to their social context (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 5ff.). In terms of a constructivist view of the world, it can be assumed that we construct meaning ourselves, based on both experience and our interactions with other people and their interpretation. In doing so, we receive orientation for ourselves from our social environment and our culture (Mezirow, 2012). Often, we also incorporate prejudices and stereotypes into our repertoire without reflecting on them; these stereotypes can have a dysfunctional or marginalising effect. Vice versa, this means that an individual who changes and shares their meaning perspectives can contribute to a change in the meaning perspectives of a collective (Arnold & Perscher 2017).

The fact that transformative learning takes place on both a personal and societal level is very beneficial for the path to sustainable development. Indeed, the experience of transformative learning is strengthened by the feeling of resonance. Resonance and transformation are nested aspects of the same process. According to Rosa (2019, p. 38 ff.), four moments are relevant here: 1) We are touched (“affected”) when exchanging with people and nature; 2) we can respond to this and feel self-efficacy (since we can react if we want to); 3) we can transform ourselves in the encounter (moment of mental appropriation). Rosa also emphasises that resonance 4) is “non-available”; it cannot be produced instrumentally and is therefore subject to self-organisation. This aspect of non-availability is also central to Wüthrich (2020, pp. 104–105): “When I enter into resonance, I have no idea what will come of it. I venture into engaging with something and I don’t know what the result of the resonance process will be. I make myself vulnerable. (...) I am sensitive to tonalities, vibrations, and constructive differences”.

Collective discussions therefore requires openness and respect for multiple perspectives and different forms of knowledge. The aim is therefore to promote change processes not only on a small scale, but also in larger groups or society. The inclusion of many and heterogeneous perspectives is an advantage in social transformation processes because this can generate the necessary irritation needed for a joint search for new meaning perspectives, ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, as well as new options.

3.3 Challenging our certainties and values means leaving our comfort zone. This requires being willing to learn and unlearn.

We need to be ready for transformative learning and be able to leave our own comfort zone provided by hitherto existing certainties. Conscious unlearning – i.e. leaving proven meaning perspectives behind – goes hand in hand with learning to think, feel, and act in new ways and changing our relationship with the world. If we want to organise such transformation processes ourselves, we are more likely to be motivated. If they are imposed from outside, resistance is likely. The transformative learning processes required for social transformation are challenging and their implementation is not always attractive: depending on various personal and contextual factors, they can trigger anxiety and stress and cause social unrest or disorientation. However, they can also bring about moments of great creativity and reflexivity (Förster et al. 2019, p. 325) and enable moments of fairer interaction with one another.

Transformative learning is usually triggered by irritations, experiences of incoherence, disorientation, or even crises: What we previously took for granted, such as our values or basic assumptions, is no longer valid. Our actions are no longer functional and we are unable to find a solution to an impending problem. Stress severely restricts our ability to criticise, learn, and engage in dialogue: When we are in stress mode, automated stress patterns take over our thoughts, feelings, and actions to help us get out of the situation as quickly as possible. This limits the critical reflection ability needed for the transformative learning process, as well as our creativity, our ability to engage in constructive social contact, e.g. to engage in dialogue and go into a state of resonance, and our ability to learn. Moreover, when previous meaning perspectives that give us orientation are called into question, our membership in a group that holds this meaning perspective is also at stake, for example when questioning our consumer behaviour is met with resistance and lack of understanding by our own circle of friends.

On the one hand, transformative learners need competences to regulate cognitively and emotionally difficult or stressful states caused by uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction, tension, complexity, and experiences of incoherence.

This includes openness to lifelong learning and the will to participate in and contribute to a vision of the future. On the other hand, safe learning environments (“safe enough spaces”) are needed that enable constructive relationships and resonance with oneself as well as with other people, living beings, or our environment (Förster et al. 2019, Singer-Brodowski et al. 2022). In these safe learning environments, critical, non-violent dialogue can take place in which the aim is not to be right, but to listen to others and oneself. As Singer-Brodowski et al. (2022, p. 7) suggest, this dialogue is best conducted in the form of so-called “edifying conversations”, which take place at eye level and allow for different perspectives and options for action.

4.

Learning environments and learning processes for transformative learning need to be shaped in a conscious and competent manner.

4.1 Transformative learning requires a shift in the understanding of teaching away from a knowledge transfer and to an enabling approach.

Transformative learning is based on a humanist, emancipatory view of humanity and a systemic view of the world. Education that aims to enable transformative learning therefore requires a systemic-constructivist understanding of teaching: instead of just imparting knowledge, it is also about empowering us to change ourselves and the systems in which we operate. This requires an enabling didactic approach that strengthens and supports learners in their search and learning process and is mindful of learners' need for self-efficacy, autonomy, and social inclusion (Arnold, 2012).

The interplay between meaning perspectives, thinking, feeling, and acting must be addressed by this understanding of teaching. And it is particularly important to foster and preserve autonomy, personal responsibility, and the ability to act in the sense of an emancipatory (empowerment) approach. This is how transformative learning processes also become political. However, the risk of learning processes being instrumentalised for certain political purposes can be mitigated by taking the "Beutelsbacher Consensus" into account. This consensus consists of three elements: no indoctrination ("prohibition against overwhelming the pupil"), "treating controversial subjects as controversial", and "giving weight to the personal interests of pupils", through which the learners position as a learner is protected. Although the guiding principle of sustainable development pursues a normative goal, it is therefore important to remain mindful not to make transformative learning a tool for asserting specific political interests, but to ensure that it remains a future-open, learning confrontation with the complex challenges of our time.

Teachers must critically reflect on their attitude and actions, create trusting relationships, and be prepared to guide and accompany learners in an emotionally and individually challenging learning process – while preserving learners' autonomy and personal responsibility. A constructive error culture and an experimental attitude are particularly helpful in phases of "not yet knowing".

4.2 Transformative learning requires specific teaching skills and corresponding professional development.

To enable transformative learning, teachers make a conscious decision in favour of this didactic approach. They align their learning objectives, educational activities, and assessment (if necessary) accordingly. Teaching does not take place with the mediation and power gap between those who know and those who do not, but with an attitude of being the learner's assistant and creating learning environments that allow for self-directed learning. This requires a didactic approach in which teachers must also see themselves as learners. The conscious handling of role expectations – as a teacher/learner on the one hand and as a facilitator of learning, giving exams or representing a discipline on the other (Thomann, 2019) – is challenging and should be addressed, actively tested, and reflected upon in initial and continuing education.

There is a double need for further teacher training: on the one hand, for teachers' basic understanding of sustainable development as a systemic-normative challenge, and on the other, for their understanding of transformative learning as a process. Such further training can help teachers develop and acquire didactic practice in concrete educational situations. In addition to developing subject-specific and methodological-didactic competences to prepare, implement, and assess courses, as well as developing social and personal competences, teachers who engage with transformative learning must also deal with their own values and norms and make these explicit for the learners (Biester & Mehlmann, 2020, p. 11).

There are only a few further training programmes of this kind for teachers who want to foster transformative learning for sustainable development. Examples of learning activities for education and training staff that enable transformative learning and could be used in continuing education programmes can be found, for example, in transdisciplinary, project- and experience-based, nature- or body-related courses (e.g. Biester & Mehlmann, 2020). There is an urgent need to further develop such programmes, based on existing experience and research, and make them widely accessible. Finally, in addition to continuing education programmes, there is a need for a well-founded and broad examination of how curricular and institutional anchoring of transformative learning processes for sustainable development can be promoted (Wilhelm et al. 2019).

4.3 Learners willing to abandon their comfort zone need safe learning environments.

If we want to be able to engage in transformative learning processes and leave our comfort zone to learn individually and collectively despite phases of not-knowing, uncertainty, disorientation, or ambiguity, we need to feel safe enough. This is also crucial if we want to avoid submitting to automated stress reactions. To this purpose, we need safe learning environments, so-called “safe enough spaces” (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2022).

To feel safe enough in the transformative learning process, we need a balance between resources – such as personal knowledge, experience, skills and abilities, including resilience, as well as sufficient time and money – and challenges. This applies to both transformative learners and teachers. Social support to foster trusting, appreciative relationships and interactions is particularly important. To master the challenges, those involved respect the autonomy of individuals, trust in their self-efficacy and resources, and fulfil the need for social inclusion. As learners, we must therefore be able to trust the process, the teacher, and the other learners, as well as ourselves. Among other things, this is the case when we feel that resources and challenges are subjectively in equilibrium. However, it must be borne in mind that every learning process – including the transformative learning process – is a source of constant irritation to the balance. If the resources are too small, we feel overwhelmed by the challenges and react with high stress levels or anxiety; if the challenges are subjectively trivial, we feel bored.

4.4 A transformative pedagogy must strengthen individual and collective self-organisation and enable action.

Transformative didactics for sustainable development must also explicitly create opportunities for experimentation, i.e. for action, in learning environments. This makes it possible to consolidate, try out, and apply what has been learnt. After all, learning means doing things yourself and acting with a sense of self-efficacy, which means that learners develop their skills and express them in their performance. This makes them experience that they are responsible for their own learning and actions.

They also experience self-efficacy in community with their fellow learners and in a context in which they often feel powerless (“eco-anxiety”), and thus recognise that they can bring about positive change both individually and collectively. Didactic formats for achieving such an outcome are, for example, transdisciplinary case studies, real-world laboratories, or service learning projects. However, these are all formats that challenge the paradigms of many educational institutions to undergo a transformation: the actors concerned feel at a loss regarding how they should deal with the educational goal of empowering self-organisation and action orientation, as they have so far largely focused only on transmitting knowledge.

So how do we make learning outcomes from an action-oriented learning process visible and measurable? The idea itself of measurability in transformative learning must first be critically scrutinised: The description of impact depends not only on predefined learning objectives, but also – and above all – on new things that only emerge from the competence- and performance-oriented and self-organised learning process. The act of reflection and review is therefore itself a central part of transformative learning (Earl & Katz, 2006). Teachers need to pay greater attention to these formative assessment processes. The issue of performance review is therefore a complex task that requires a solid understanding of institutional circumstances as well as a creative approach (Wilhelm et al., 2019). And this is also part of the further training required for transformative teachers.

Literature & Links

Arnold, R. (2012)

Ich lerne, also bin ich. Eine systemisch-konstruktivistische Didaktik.
Heidelberg: Carl-Auer Verlag.

Arnold, R., & Prescher, T. (2017)

From transformative leadership to transformative learning. In: Laros, A., Fuhr, T. & Taylor, E.W. (eds.) Transformative Learning Meets Bildung (pp. 279-294).
Leiden: Brill.

Balsiger, J., Förster, R., Mader, C., Nagel, U., Sironi, H., Wilhelm, S., & Zimmermann, A. B. (2017)

Transformative Learning and Education for Sustainable Development. GAIA – Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society, 26(4), 357-359.
doi:10.14512/gaia.26.4.15

Dixson-Declève, S., Gaffney, O., Ghosh, J., Randers, J., Rockström, J., Stoknes, P.E. (2022)

Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity: A Report to the Club of Rome (2022) – Fifty Years After The limits of growth (1972). Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

Biester, U. & Mehlmann, M., eds. (2020)

A Transformative Edge. Knowledge, Inspiration and Experiences for Educators of Adults. Berlin: Transformation Hosts international.

Biester, U. & Mehlmann, M., eds. (2020)

A Transformative Edge. Knowledge, Inspiration and Experiences for Educators of Adults. Berlin: Transformation Hosts international.

Cranton, P., & Taylor, E. W. (2012)

Transformative Learning Theory: Seeking a More Unified Theory. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), The handbook of transformative learning : Theory, research, and practice (pp. 3-20). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Earl, L. & Katz, S. (2006)

Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind: Assessment for Learning, Assessment as Learning, Assessment of Learning, Winnipeg, Canada: Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth.

Förster, R., Zimmermann, A. B. & Mader, C. (2019)
Transformative teaching in higher education for sustainable development:
Facing the challenges. *GAIA – Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society*,
28, 324-326. <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.28.3.18>

Getzin, S. & Singer-Brodowski, M. (2016)
Transformatives Lernen in einer Degrowth-Gesellschaft. *Journal of
Science-Society Interfaces*, 1, 33-46.

Lange, E. A. (2012)
Transforming Transformative Learning Through Sustainability and the New
Science. In Taylor, E. W. & Cranton, P. (eds.) *The Handbook of Transformative
Learning. Theory, Research, and Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, pp
195-211.

Mezirow, J. (1997)
Transformative Erwachsenenbildung. Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag
Hohengehren.

Mezirow, J. (2012)
Learning to think like an adult. Core concepts of transformation theory. In
Taylor, E. W. & Cranton, P. (eds.) *The Handbook of Transformative Learning:
Theory, Research, and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp 73-95.

Reißig, R. (2014)
Transformation – ein spezifischer Typ sozialen Wandels: Ein analytischer und
sozialtheoretischer Entwurf. In M. Brie (ed.), *Futuring – Perspektiven der
Transformation im Kapitalismus über ihn hinaus* (pp. 50-100). Münster,
Germany: Westfälisches Dampfboot.

Rosa, H. (2019)
Unverfügbarkeit. 3. Aufl. Wien: Residenz Verlag GmbH.

Singer-Brodowski, M. (2016)
Transformative Bildung durch transformatives Lernen. Zur Notwendigkeit der
erziehungswissenschaftlichen Fundierung einer neuen Idee. *Zeitschrift für
internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik* (1), 13-17.

Singer-Brodowski, M., Förster, R., Eschenbacher, S., Biberhofer, P., & Getzin, S.
(2022)

Manifesto

Learning for Transformation

Website: www.learning-for-transformation.ch

Contact: contact@learning-for-transformation.ch

© learning-for-transformation.ch, initiated by saguf AG BNE

