

# Guest Author The Role of Creative Caring in Transformative Learning for Sustainable Lifestyles

Victoria W. Thoresen<sup>+</sup> (Norway)

*Notes from a presentation at the International Association of Universities conference in Bangkok, November 2016.*

## Introduction

Around the world, increasingly more and more educators are asking how they can assist learners to contribute to constructive change through the way one chooses to live. The answers are many and diverse but certain common elements have been identified and these are connected to developing the ability to reflect on one's values, to care, consult and be creative.

## Constructive Change

What is meant by “constructive change”? Is it a larvae turning into a butterfly; a seed becoming a flower; or a drop of water being converted to electricity? These are dramatic alterations, total adjustments in the world of Nature. Transformations that take place in human society can be equally as metamorphic but often tend to be destructive. What appears to fail to function is torn down in the name of change

<sup>+</sup> Victoria W. Thoresen, Director of The Center for Collaborative Learning for Sustainable Development; UNESCO Chair for Education for Sustainable Lifestyles, Inland University of Applied Sciences, P.O.Box 400, 2418 Elverum, Norway. voice: +47 625 17636 email: victoria.thoresen@inn.no website: [www.livingresponsibly.org](http://www.livingresponsibly.org).

without necessarily having alternatives at hand. In the spirit of “progress,” untested initiatives often emerge with little regard to potential consequences. Constructive change builds on experience rather than beginning from scratch. It consists of initiatives that lead to new opportunities in harmony with what exists. Similarly, individuals experience constructive change within their own lives when personal transformation stems from previous understanding.

Constructive change is not necessarily the same for people in different places and conditions but there are common aspects of constructive change that are relevant to individuals and groups everywhere.

- Awareness of what is most important in one’s own life and the lives of others
- Insight into the extent to which one’s actions lead to what one considers most important and insight into what hinders or furthers progress towards one’s goals
- Commitment to trying to effect change
- Courage to do so despite the barriers one might encounter

### **Constructive Change and the Sustainable Development Goals**

The international community has adopted Agenda 2030 that consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are based upon definitions of “sustainability” and of “development” that are in many ways broader and more inclusive than previously. Sustainability is not only a question of environmental protection, nor is development merely an issue of economic growth. Achieving the SDGs is seen as a process of constructive change requiring both “top-down” global/national governance and “bottom-up” individual and community initiatives. But where will the motivation for such individual and community initiatives and partnerships to come from?

Education is one answer given to that question. SDG #4 deals specifically with education even though it is made clear that education is also a red thread running through all the goals. Education is generally referred to in the SDGs as the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills. SDG target #4.7 includes education that “promotes a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.” Yet, knowledge plus skills does not necessarily lead to significant behavior modification as research on “knowledge-action gaps” indicates. Altering the way one acts is dependent on motivation arising from compelling changes. This is what transformational learning is about.

### **Transformational Learning**

Identifying which learning processes trigger significant shifts in people’s attitudes and behavior has been the goal of many researchers over recent decades. Paulo Freire’s theories of social change have influenced educators worldwide to concentrate on the development of “critical consciousness” in learners. Jack Mezirow (2000) built on Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) theory of paradigm shifts and contends that transformational learning involves the expansion of cognitive consciousness

based on altering deep set perspectives and worldviews. In response to Mezirow's approach, Larry Dalo (1986) highlighted the intuitive and psycho-social elements of transformative learning.

While transformational learning consists of inspirational, systemic approaches that assist individuals to re-conceptualize and re-apply new understanding to their daily lives, there are certain core elements common to transformative learning that are particularly applicable to education for sustainable development and which, when brought together, appear to acquire an almost magical synergy. These elements weave together cognitive and affective dimensions of transformative learning. They are caring, consulting and being creative.

"The changes in the world today are characterized by new levels of complexity and contradiction. These changes generate tensions for which education is expected to prepare individuals and communities by giving them the capability to adapt and to respond."<sup>1</sup>

### **The Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living (PERL)**

The Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living ([www.livingresponsibly.org](http://www.livingresponsibly.org)) has worked the last 20 years within the context of education for sustainable lifestyles to contribute to constructive change. This network of 140 universities and international institutions in 50 countries has focused on developing:

- Common understandings achieved through collective research, discourse and consultation locally, regionally, and globally
- Creative activities as a part of what is now called "deep learning"; in other words: pedagogical methods for gaining awareness, insight, commitment and courage that are trans-disciplinary, holistic, active and involve local communities
- Mutual support through encouragement and extensive, honest and open collaboration. The majority of our partners have worked together for nearly 20 years

The key to the work PERL has carried out for constructive change towards sustainable lifestyles has been the integration of transformational learning in all of the pedagogical methodologies and materials it has created.

### **PERL Learning Methodologies**

#### **1) *Learning using values-based indicators***

This is a problem-centered approach to learning that links values vocabulary to real-world behavior. The aim of this approach is to close the so-called "value-action gaps" and help individuals and groups identify and do what is truly important to them. Values-based indicators provide an "inside-out" approach as opposed to "top-down" performance indicators created by policy makers on national or regional levels. Values, which often seem intangible and unmeasurable, are reflected in actions that make them visible. By helping to clarify and communicate shared

values, the indicators can motivate learners to adopt behaviors that genuinely reflect values – rather than behaviors driven by habit, imitation of others, commercial persuasion or the desire for wealth or social recognition.<sup>2</sup>

## 2) *Active Learning with Images and Objects*

Active Learning Using Images and Objects methodology focuses on the use of visual stimuli and incorporated sets of images with supporting activities to provide a ‘quick start’ for teachers in both formal and informal educational settings who wish to integrate aspects of education for sustainable development in their teaching environments.<sup>3</sup>

## 3) *LOLA (Looking for Likely Alternatives: learning via social innovation)*

LOLA is a learning methodology whose goal is to help teachers and learners search for, come in contact with, and give visibility to new approaches to sustainable lifestyles in their local community. Based on the conviction that radical change does not only come from top-down policies, LOLA helps learners look for promising sustainable initiatives at a walking distance from the school. Coming face to face with friends and neighbors who are actively involved in efforts to create more sustainable lifestyles, affects not only the knowledge base of students, but influences attitudes and behavior.

## **PERL Learning Methodologies and Transformational Learning**

The PERL learning methodologies emphasize the affective dimensions of transformative learning while not ignoring the cognitive elements. It is their means of developing in the learners the ability to care, consult and to be creative that distinguishes them from much other traditional transformative learning. These core elements function in a synergetic manner, causing a change in the learner that is not merely intellectual but also emotional and highly motivational. According to feedback from the participants, these methodologies stimulate actual behaviour change as well as willingness to change.

## **Challenges Ahead**

Transformative learning that includes reflecting on values, caring, consulting and being creative is not easy. Several reasons exist for this. There is the complexity of the interrelated and interdependent nature of our global society which often tends to confuse and de-personalize learning. Existing economic systems with their egocentric emphasis and excessive commercial pressure often highlight values contradictory to those of individuals and some societies. Political winds blow from time to time that undermine cooperation and constructive change. Media, with its subtle manipulation of public opinion does not always contribute to the discourse on constructive change for sustainable development. Within educational institutions, inflexible structures hinder pedagogical approaches that are interdisciplinary, practical and innovative. And, in many cases, personal and social prejudices, as well as habits and fears, restrict the ability to be open to alternative ways of thinking and living.

### Reflecting Our Hopes in Our Actions

Caring, consultation and creativity are core elements of transformational learning. Transformative learning goes beyond mere accumulation of knowledge and skills. It appears to be an important means of contributing to the emergence of individuals willing and capable of moving towards a more socially just, economically equitable and environmentally sustainable future.

“May your choices reflect your hopes not your fears.”

Nelson Mandela

“When the winds of change blow, some people build walls others build windmills.”

Ancient Chinese Proverb

### References

- Dale, E. *Audio-Visual Methods in Teaching*. New York, The Dryden Press, 1957.
- Daloz, L. A. *Effective Teaching and Mentoring: Realizing the Transformational Power of Adult Learning Experiences*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.
- Dirkx, John M. Transformative Learning Theory in the Practice of Adult Education: An Overview. ” *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, vol. 7, 1998, 1-14.
- Mezirow, J. *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000.
- PERL (The Partnership for Education and Research About Responsible Living), “Learning to Do: Education for Sustainable Living.” Hamar: Norway, 2016.
- Thoresen, Victoria W., Robert J. Didham, Jørgen Klein, Declan (Red) Doyle. *Responsible Living – Concepts, Education and Future Perspectives*. Springer Publishing, Switzerland, 2015.
- UNESCO. *Shaping the Future We Want, U.N. Decade of Education for Sustainable Development: Final Report*. UNESCO: Paris, 2014.
- UNESCO. *Rethinking Education – Towards a Common Good?* UNESCO: Paris, 2015.
- University of Applied Sciences. Norway. [www.livingresponsibly.org](http://www.livingresponsibly.org) (accessed February 21, 2017).

### Endnotes

- 1 UNESCO (2015) *Rethinking Education-Towards a Common Good?* UNESCO Paris, p. 9.
- 2 PERL (2016) *Learning to Do: Education for Sustainable Living*; Hamar, Norway.
- 3 *ibid.*

