

TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION: PHILOSOPHICAL,  
PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND PEDAGOGICAL DIMENSIONS

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## INTRODUCTION AND AIMS OF THE SYMPOSIUM

One of the enduring mysteries of the human experience is our capacity to undergo profound changes in the values, modes of thought, self-conceptions, and guiding ideals that have given shape to our lives. Moved by an encounter of sublime beauty in a piece of music, thrust into a new way of life after immigrating to a foreign country, inspired by the courage of a character in a novel, or impelled by the example set by a trusted teacher, we decide to follow a new path for ourselves — one that, just a short time before, was either unforeseeable or seemingly unforgeable for us. We call these experiences transformative, and we often look back on them with gratitude for the person they have made us into and even a bit of awe at the obscurity of their inner workings.

Understanding the human capacity for transformative change has a long history in Western philosophy. We see already in Plato's Allegory of the Cave a dramatic depiction of personal transformation, and Augustine, Kant, Hegel, James, and Dewey would devote pages to its study as well. It is also a popular and recurring theme of literature and art. From Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to T. H. White's *Once and Future King*, the idea of personal transformation continues to capture the Western imagination. Perhaps Wotan of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* captures this sentiment most succinctly: "Transformation and turmoil are loved by those who live."<sup>1</sup> In spite of this long legacy of thinking about transformation, only recently has it become a topic of extensive empirical and theoretical research. Especially in education, but not only there, the mystery and promise of transformation has had

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1. Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold* (Stuttgart, Germany: Reclam, 2009).

broad appeal. In educational psychology,<sup>2</sup> social justice education,<sup>3</sup> adult education,<sup>4</sup> school leadership studies,<sup>5</sup> higher education,<sup>6</sup> and philosophy of education,<sup>7</sup> researchers have pointed to the transformative potential lying within the educational environment. Unlocking this potential is a fundamental aim of teaching and learning, proponents of transformative education have argued, and it is the task of the researcher to provide theoretical and conceptual resources to understand how we might do so. If education is about something more than providing the epistemic goods necessary for a productive career and the social and cultural appurtenances of middle-class life, then perhaps it is this: to transform us, to jumpstart processes of profound and existentially meaningful change that make us into the people we — or at least our educators — know we can be.

Driven by something like this conviction, educational researchers in the last half-decade or so have offered numerous conceptions of what a truly transformative education might look like, employing terms like *transformative pedagogy*,<sup>8</sup>

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2. Kevin Pugh, "Teaching for Idea-Based, Transformative Experiences in Science: An Investigation of the Effectiveness of Two Instructional Elements," *Teachers College Record* 104, no. 6 (2002): 1101–1137.

3. C. Alejandra Elenes, "Transformando fronteras: Chicana Feminist Transformative Pedagogies," in *Education Feminism: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, Lynda Stone, and Katharine M. Sprecher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 341–353.

4. Jack Mezirow, "Perspective Transformation," *Adult Education Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1978): 100–110; and Jack Mezirow, "A Critical Theory of Adult Learning and Education," *Adult Education Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1981): 3–24.

5. Carolyn M. Shields, "Transformative Leadership: Working for Equity in Diverse Contexts," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (2010): 558–589.

6. Richard P. Keeling, *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004).

7. Andrea English, *Discontinuity in Learning: Dewey, Herbart, and Education as Transformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

8. Elenes, "Transformando fronteras," 341–353; Biren (Ratnesh) A. Nagda, Patricia Gurin, and Gretchen E. Lopez, "Transformative Pedagogy for Democracy and Social Justice," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 6, no. 2 (2003): 165–191; David Lusted, "Why Pedagogy?," *Screen* 27, no. 5 (1986): 2–16; and bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

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*transformative learning*,<sup>9</sup> *transformational teaching*,<sup>10</sup> *transformative experience*,<sup>11</sup> *transformative school leadership*,<sup>12</sup> and *transformative Bildung*<sup>13</sup> to describe their vision. Within this discussion one can find rich and compelling resources for how to conceive of the transformative process and how to turn the classroom into a space for transformation. The person looking for guidance on these matters will find a vast and growing literature on this important idea.

At the same time, he or she will also find that the current discussion about transformation and its role in the educational process has been carried out largely within traditional disciplinary boundaries. Although the idea of transformation has been assayed from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives, attempts to account for the substantive and sometimes drastic differences in the aims, methods, and meanings that have been ascribed to transformative education are almost completely lacking. In one context, for example, transformative education is closely aligned with the project of eradicating oppression and injustice,<sup>14</sup> while in another it is derived from a phenomenological account of experience and thus

9. Edward W. Taylor and Patricia Cranton, *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass); and English, *Discontinuity in Learning*.

10. Todd Finley, "4 Things Transformational Teachers Do" *edutopia* [Website] (2015), <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/big-things-transformational-teachers-do-todd-finley> (last modified July 15, 2014); Thomas R. Rosebrough and Ralph G. Leverett, *Transformational Teaching in the Information Age: Making Why and How We Teach Relevant to Students* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2011); and George M. Slavich and Philip G. Zimbardo, "Transformational Teaching: Theoretical Underpinnings, Basic Principles, and Core Methods," *Educational Psychology Review* 24, no. 4 (2012): 569–608. Compare with Peggy Albers and Tammy Frederick, "'We teach who we are': A Study of Two Latino Transformative Educators," *TESOL Journal* 4, no. 2 (2013): 233–260; Laura E. Pinto et al., "Charismatic, Competent or Transformative? Ontario School Administrators' Perceptions of 'Good Teachers,'" *Journal of Teaching and Learning* 8, no. 1 (2012): 73–90; and Henry A. Giroux, Paulo Freire, and Peter McLaren, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1988).

11. Laurie Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Kevin Pugh, "Transformative Experience: An Integrative Construct in the Spirit of Deweyan Pragmatism," *Educational Psychologist* 46, no. 2 (2011): 107–121.

12. Eric J. Weiner, "Secretary Paulo Freire and the Democratization of Power: Toward a Theory of Transformative Leadership," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 1 (2003): 89–106; C. M. Shields, "Dialogic Leadership for Social Justice: Overcoming Pathologies of Silence," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2004): 109–132; and Shields, "Transformative Leadership," 558–589.

13. Hans-Christoph Koller, *Bildung anders denken: Einführung in die Theorie transformatorischer Bildungsprozesse* [Thinking about Education Differently: Introduction to the Theory of Transformative Bildung Processes] (Stuttgart, Germany: Kohlhammer, 2012); Winfried Marotzki, *Entwurf einer strukturalen Bildungstheorie: Biographietheoretische Auslegung von Bildungsprozessen in hochkomplexen Gesellschaften* [Drafting a Structural Theory of Bildung: A Biographical-Theoretical Interpretation of Bildung Processes in Complex Societies] (Weinheim, Germany: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1990); and Rainer Kokemohr, "Bildung als Welt- und Selbstentwurf im Fremden. Annäherungen an eine Bildungsprozess-theorie" [Conceptualizing World and Self in Bildung Processes and Encounters with the Foreign: Contributions to a Theory of Transformative Bildung Processes], in *Bildungsprozesse und Fremdheitserfahrung: Beiträge zu einer Theorie transformatorischer Bildung*, ed. Hans-Christoph Koller, Winfried Marotzki, and Olaf Sanders (Weinheim, Germany: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 2007), 13–68.

14. Elenes, "Transformando fronteras," 341–353.

carries no particular implications for social justice.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes transformative education refers to deep forms of learning in which students experience an expansion of value and meaning with respect to new science concepts,<sup>16</sup> and other times it concerns principally learning how to learn.<sup>17</sup> So what are the defining characteristics of a specifically transformative approach to education? What exactly is transformed in the process? How are we to think of the outcome of transformation? Is transformation always a desirable aim? What are the ethical risks involved? Are we comfortable granting teachers the power to transform? A birds-eye view of the literature reveals a deep dissensus about these questions.

This lack of disciplinary crossover holds not only between the various disciplines of educational research, but also between (1) the Anglo-American and German educational research communities, and (2) educational research and philosophy proper. Concerning the former, exciting recent work on the notion of *transformatorische Bildungsprozesse* in the German context, in addition to the long phenomenological tradition centering around the concept of *Horizontwandel* (horizon transformation), have gone largely unnoticed in the English-speaking world. Concerning the latter, recent work in philosophy proper on “transformative experience”<sup>18</sup> and the special “agency of becoming”<sup>19</sup> that transformative experiences can encompass have yet to make it into the pages of educational research and philosophy of education.

To our minds, the current discussion of transformation in education has thus come to a crossroads. If it were to proceed along the traditional disciplinary lines it has previously followed, it may suffer the fate of other central educational ideas such as “multicultural education” or “liberal education,” which are regularly appropriated to mean just about anything under the pedagogical sun. The problem with abiding contradictory proposals within the conceptual boundaries of important ideas is that they can thereby become mere rhetoric. In the absence of firm philosophical grounding, calling a method or educational experience “transformative” becomes a way of saying “I like this!” rather than referring to anything characteristically transformative about the proposal. The end result is that “transformative education” loses its capacity to pose an alternative to the educational status quo, further ossifying the place of mediocre and uninspired pedagogy in the day-to-day of teaching and learning. Instead of challenging the epistemic boundaries of students’ understanding, transformative education is turned into an entertaining repackaging of the material needed for success on standardized tests. Instead of confronting students with compelling figures of integrity, courage, foresight, or compassion, transformative education is boxed into the paradigm

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15. English, *Discontinuity in Learning*.

16. Pugh, “Transformative Experience,” 107–121.

17. Slavich and Zimbardo, “Transformational Teaching,” 569–608.

18. Paul, *Transformative Experience*.

19. Agnes Callard, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

of acquiring reflective competencies and critical thinking skills. And instead of encouraging students to inquire into their own frameworks of value to see whether they are coherent, empowering, and socially responsible, transformative education becomes a means of getting into a good college and finding a lucrative profession. There is worrying evidence that this appropriation is already occurring.<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of this symposium is therefore to provide further philosophical grounding for the idea of a transformative education. Simultaneously, it aims to open up an interdisciplinary discussion that includes some of the leading contributors to the discussion of transformative education to date. These contributors represent various fields of educational research and philosophy, both in the Anglo-American context and the German-speaking world. This symposium therefore constitutes one of the first truly interdisciplinary attempts to understand the complex phenomenon of transformative self-change and its role in the educational process. In what follows, we outline how each of the symposium contributors advances this purpose.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS

Kevin Pugh, Dylan Kriescher, Simon Cropp, and Maaly Younis explore the philosophical groundings of an emerging perspective in educational psychology, transformative experience (TE) theory, which Pugh has developed over the last decade. TE theory has already proven to be a central contribution to empirical research on science education, and the authors show that it has its roots in Dewey's philosophy of experience. In the article, Pugh and his coauthors demonstrate how several crucial facets of transformative experience derive directly from some of the core concepts of Deweyan thought, specifically, the concepts of *an* experience, *ideas*, and *educative experience*, while at the same time pointing to some of the limitations and incompatibilities that emerge when TE theory is exclusively derived from Dewey. To address some of these shortcomings, the authors point to the philosophical perspectives dealing with the sublime and awe, Romantic science, critical theory, and transformative learning theory as potential resources for further developing the empirical construct of transformative experience.

In their contribution, Laurie Paul and John Quiggin argue that institutions of higher education inevitably pursue a transformative educational project. The transformative experience that characteristically occurs in higher education involves the emergence of a form of criticality in students. In their view, colleges and universities can provide spaces for students to experience a Kuhnian scientific revolution in their thinking, with the effect that students can thereby become more critically minded individuals in many areas of their intellectual lives. In making this argument, Paul and Quiggin take up a position contrary to commentators on higher education such as Stanley Fish, who maintain that colleges and universities should focus only on the mastery of scholarly skills. Against this view, Paul and Quiggin

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20. See, for example, David Burgess, *Teach like a Pirate: Increase Student Engagement, Boost Your Creativity, and Transform Your Life as an Educator* (San Diego, CA: Dave Burgess Consulting, 2012), 60; and Finley, "4 Things Transformational Teachers Do."

argue that transformative epistemic and personal growth forms a core aim of higher education. In the final lines of the article, the authors point out that the recent shift to digital platforms in university teaching brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic can serve as a test case for the transformative dimensions of higher education. In particular, we can begin to observe how much of the transformative effect of higher education is due exclusively to engagement with course content versus the role of students' wider experience of being on campus.

In his contribution, Randall Curren discusses the role of transformative experiences in education, with a specific focus on valuing. Engaging with Laurie Paul's influential 2014 book *Transformative Experience*, Curren offers a holistic picture of transformative experience by putting the process in the wider context of what he calls a *fully transformative package*, which includes changes in values, capabilities, and understanding. Given this notion of transformation, he raises questions with important practical implications: Which ethical issues arise when we aim at orchestrating educational experiences that may prove to be transformative? What transformations are worth orchestrating in education? Curren argues from an Aristotelian perspective that the student's capacity to live well is at the center of these questions. When defining what qualifies as an ethically defensible transformative education, one needs to reflect on what count as necessary goods and desirable capabilities for students to acquire in the transformative process. In other words, Curren urges us to consider whether we can observe in the transformation a "fulfillment of [students'] species-potential in eudaimonic activity that is the substance of a life lived well."<sup>21</sup> This specification helps us to recognize that not every kind of transformation is worth pursuing (from the teacher's perspective) or worth having (from the student's perspective) in an educational context.

In a similar vein to Curren, Ryan Kemp points to some potentially serious limitations and ethical pitfalls of transformative education. In particular, Kemp argues that transformative experiences can lead us away from personal flourishing. He makes — as he himself calls it — an "unlikely case for a certain kind of value stability."<sup>22</sup> Kemp draws on a novel by Wendell Berry (*Hannah Coulter*) and Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope* to question the very rationality of aspiring to be a different person, that is, to take on values that conflict with our foundational values.<sup>23</sup> Kemp maintains that in most cases, if not all, it is irrational to have this desire, since it requires that we give up on the volitional sources that render our practical decision-making coherent and agentive. If transformative education encourages this kind of "radical" aspiration, then it may seriously undermine students' capacity to flourish.

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21. Randall Curren, "Transformative Valuing," in this issue.

22. Ryan S. Kemp, "Lessons in Self-Betrayal: On the Pitfalls of Transformative Education," in this issue.

23. Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2004); and Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

James Gordon reexamines Ryan Kemp's "self-transformation puzzle," with specific reference to the 2015 article in which Kemp originally developed this idea.<sup>24</sup> In Kemp's formulation, the attempt to understand experiences of self-transformation as expressions of personal agency introduces a host of difficult ethical and logical paradoxes. To avoid these paradoxes, Kemp recommends conceiving of self-transformation as an externally caused phenomenon, something that happens *to us*. Gordon suggests an alternative perspective on the topic of self-transformation by drawing on the "aspirational" concept of self-change offered recently by Agnes Callard. Gordon suggests that aspiration points to a mode of rational agency that is active when choosing to undergo transformative self-change. Given the new conceptual grounds provided by aspirational self-change, Gordon not only tackles several potential problems with the inner structure of Kemp's puzzle, but he also offers new perspectives on the educational practices involved in transformative education when conducted in aspirational terms. In particular, Gordon suggests that educators be held to aspirational rather than performance-based standards: they should be evaluated on their ability to model the values to which their students should aspire rather than on their students' success or failure.

Hans-Christoph Koller contributes an essay to the symposium that focuses on the German concept of transformative *Bildung*. *Bildung*, which is sometimes translated as "self-formation," has been the guiding concept in German philosophy and theory of education for the last 200 years. Koller draws from this tradition and takes as his starting point Wilhelm von Humboldt's notion of *Bildung*. However, instead of simply reproducing the theory of *Bildung* found in German Idealism, Koller suggests a contemporary concept of *transformatorische Bildung*. By referring to Bourdieu, Derrida, and phenomenological thought, Koller conceptualizes a theory of transformative *Bildung* that seeks to be relevant for the idiosyncrasies of the modern (or postmodern) world, as well as for prevalent questions regarding how to connect a theory of *Bildung* to empirical research. In doing so, Koller builds upon previous work developed in his 2012 book *Bildung anders denken*, which has received a wide reception among educational theorists and qualitative researchers in the German-speaking context.<sup>25</sup>

Diane Murdoch, Andrea English, Allison Hintz, and Kersti Tyson's contribution takes up the important and hitherto underexplored connections between inclusive and transformative education. In particular, they argue that productive, rather than destructive, transformations in inclusive settings involve enabling students to "feel heard." To accomplish this task, teachers must be able to recognize the perfectibility of learners, to build meaningful forms of community within the classroom, and to practice a form of listening that acknowledges the unique contributions of each learner. The authors come to the conclusion that enabling students

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24. Ryan Kemp, "The Self-Transformation Puzzle," *Res Philosophica* 92, no. 2 (2015): 389–417.

25. The full citation for Koller's *Bildung anders denken* is in note 13.

to feel heard is not only a worthy educational aim, but an essential aspect of inclusive education.

#### OUTLOOK FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The contributions to this symposium cover important new ground along the philosophical, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions of transformative education. They provide answers to some of the key questions that arise in these areas: what role transformative experiences should play in education and *Bildung* (Pugh, Kriescher, Cropp, and Younis; Paul and Quiggin; Koller), what the ethical limitations of transformative education may be (Kemp, Curren), how transformative education can be enriched by experiences of difference and inclusion (Murdoch, English, Hintz, and Tyson; Koller), and to what extent transformative education supports aspirational self-creation or re-creation (Gordon, Kemp). In doing so, these contributions provide an excellent basis for future philosophical inquiry on transformative education. We believe future research on the topic of transformation to be of central importance for two reasons. First, in an age in which empirical methods of educational research are considered the gold standard for developing approaches to classroom pedagogy, it is important to demonstrate the empirical aspects and implications of philosophical inquiry. As the contributions of this symposium show, philosophy of education can be a means of synthesizing empirical research findings with the lessons of common experience into reflective principles of action. Second, there are still many profound theoretical and practical questions that this symposium leaves open. The more philosophers, philosophers of education, and educational researchers engage with questions like these, the richer the field becomes.

Here is a sample of questions that we deem particularly worth pursuing in future research on transformative education, broken down into several areas of focus:

- 1 *Normativity*: What are the normative assumptions and boundaries of a theory of transformative education? Which features of a transformative process can be considered valuable and desirable? Are there transformative processes that can or should not be considered *educational*? What ethical dangers are involved in transforming students?
- 2 *Generativity*: What kinds of experiences trigger or generate transformative processes? Can experiences of crisis hold transformational potential? Can suffering be instrumental for initiating transformation? If so, how is what is generated from such “negatively initiated” transformations different in quality or value from other transformations?
- 3 *Subjectivity*: Why are some experiences transformative for one person and of little or no existential significance for another? A piece of music, for example, might prove to be transformative for one concertgoer, but completely unmoving for the people on her left and right. How might a theory of transformative education account for the specific aesthetic, epistemic,



ethical, and personal dispositions of the subjects who undergo transformation? What concept of the self underlies a theory of transformative education?

4 *Applicability*: Do we do the phenomenon of transformation an injustice when we try to develop a pedagogical program to intentionally bring it about? Is there something about transformative experiences that take place in everyday life that cannot be harnessed by the teacher? Are there, in other words, limitations introduced by the pedagogical environment that determine what types of transformation or transformative experiences are possible, and what quality they might have?

Although not all of the questions we might want to have answered about the promises and pitfalls of transformative education are resolved in this symposium, we are sure that its contributions will advance readers' interest in and knowledge about transformative education.