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Transformative learning meets *Bildung*: An international exchange

Edited by Anna Laros, Thomas Fuhr and Edward W. Taylor. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2017, 399 pp. International Issues in Adult Education, vol. 21. ISBN 978-94-6300-796-2 (hbk), ISBN 978-94-6300-795-5 (pbk), ISBN 978-94-6300-797-9 (eBook)

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In their introduction to this book, the editors immediately emphasise the similarities as well as the differences between *Bildung*¹ and transformative learning (TL).² By using the term *meets* in the title, the editors recognise that “... the differences should not conceal that both theories generally conceptualize learning very similarly, namely as the construction of experiences. Therefore, for the theories of *Bildung* and TL, the first step of learning from each other will be to perceive the other side and to learn from its theoretical ideas and empirical results. For this purpose, this book represents a great foundation” (p. xiii). This book review tests this claim through opposing in particular the differences between the theories from an empirical perspective, because the authors of the book, coming from both sides of the Atlantic ocean, may have written their chapters with possibly at least some (culturally) false preferences.

Let me start with an overview of the differences between the theories of *Bildung* and TL. I purposefully disregard available empirical results, because collaborative practice speaks by definition its own language and truth. There are, to begin with, some historical and cultural differences between the two theories. The question is

¹ As the editors point out, the German term “*Bildung*” has no literal translation into English. Some translate it as cultivation, while in the Romance languages, the term *formation* ... is used [*formation* in French, *formazione* in Italian and *formación* in Spanish] ... It refers to processes of interpretation, understanding, or appropriation (*Aneignung*) of knowledge that transforms the learner’s personality. *Bildung* is cultivation of the self by the self, as well as to the state of being educated, cultivated, or learned” (p. ix).

² In a nutshell, transformative learning (again in the words of the editors) “is about the re-interpretation of prior experience through reflection, particularly of assumptions acquired uncritically during childhood and youth. Responding to a disorienting experience, learners question taken-for-granted meanings, search for alternative frames of thinking and learn to integrate the alternative meanings into their life” (p. x).

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Table 1 Overview of the most striking differences mentioned in the introduction

	<i>Bildung</i>	Transformative Learning
Period	Two centuries of history	Four decades of history
Context	European continental context of education	North American context of adult learning
Culture	Tradition of Folk High Schools	Tradition of issues of race and first nation perspective
Goal	Cultivation of the self by the self	Re-interpretation of prior experience through reflection
Basics	Rooted in philosophy in a broad sense	Rooted in progressive education, humanistic psychology and pragmatist philosophy
Methodology	Discourse and philosophical inquiry	Empirical research-based
Focus	Child, youth and adulthood	(Transition to) adulthood (lifelong)

whether they are of interest when considering both approaches as theorising learning in a broad perspective. The idea of theory as such is by definition that it explains and describes as best and closely as possible the empirical practices. Table 1 gives an overview of the most striking differences mentioned in the introduction of the book.

The book consists of seven sections comprising a total of 29 chapters, complemented by an afterword at the end. In this review, I will focus on and compare the seven differences listed in Table 1 whenever they are presented in the various chapters within the sections.

In the first section, Thomas Fuhr (chapter 1) and Edward Taylor (chapter 2) each introduce and give an overview of *Bildung* and Transformative Learning respectively. There is a long history of the idea of *Bildung*. This has led to critiques: it is an elitist concept; it can be used in a nationalistic manner; it concerns an outdated understanding of human nature and it implies a philosophy of the subject that is doubted by postmodernism. Transformative learning, by contrast, is actually a fast-growing area of study and research and significantly influences practices of adult teaching because it is also very pragmatic. The contexts of both approaches seem to have hardly any synergy. The reason for that lies probably mainly in the almost dialectic differences in culture and basics (see Table 1 for that). In sum, Thomas Fuhr in his contribution at least tries to connect *Bildung* and TL through postmodernism and ideas of Gert Biesta (2007).³ Conversely, Edward Taylor emphasises that from an understanding perspective there is still much to be known about the practice of transformative learning.

In the second section, only authors from Germany really go into the question of how to assimilate transformation in *Bildung*. Their three contributions challenge the borderline – if any – between the self and the world (and their interrelatedness). Hans-Christoph Koller (chapter 3) asks, for example, how transformative processes

³ Biesta, G. (2007). *Beyond learning: Democratic education for a human future*. Boulder, CO/London: Paradigm.

(in *Bildung*) can be distinguished from mere adaptations to social requirements. In chapter 4, Joachim Ludwig stresses, from the perspective of a subjective theory of learning (Holzkamp 1993),⁴ that meanings are not only seen as being constructed interactively, but also as the result of social, cultural and economic processes of production and reproduction (in congruence with Pierre Bourdieu's habitus). In chapter 5, Thomas Neubauer and Annika Lehmann finally start with describing the theoretical-analytical approach of *Bildung* (based on Koller 2012),⁵ which has been studied through an explorative empirical research on student essays, and show that the theory of *Bildung* explicitly acknowledges and works with the unpredictability of the New (actions from the sphere of possibilities) as a central characteristic. According to the authors, this aspect in particular is not handled within transformative learning theory (such as Jack Mezirow's ten-step model; Mezirow 1997).⁶

The third section focuses on "crisis and continuity". Again three authors from Germany and one from Switzerland relate *Bildung* with transformative learning through concepts and topics which originate from the first and may appear different in the second approach. Malte Brinkmann (chapter 6) argues that repetition should not be regarded as boring but is the core of reflection and therefore transformation. Transformation and reframing of experience are realised through it. In chapter 7, Anna Laros from Switzerland goes into the breadth and depth of disorienting dilemmas which may trigger transformation. Her contribution is based on a study of 11 female immigrant entrepreneurs using narrative-style interviews. These interviews show the importance of "understanding what is happening" before participants question their self-concept (work-related in this case). In chapter 8, Arnd-Micheal Nohl addresses the demarcation between various learning metaphors, like accumulation and assimilation, which pertain only to knowledge and skills fragments of the self and the world, while transformative learning (as does *Bildung*) concerns the self- and world-references in their entirety. Finally, Sabine Schmidt-Lauff (chapter 9) foregrounds the usually forgotten topic of *time*. "Time for processes in which intended learning can take place should not continue to be further dispersed between work and life, but should exist as an essentially unburdened, exclusive window of time" (p. 115).

The fourth section features contributions by authors from the United States and Italy and two German authors as well. Entitled "Theoretical approaches to Bildung and Learning", this section differs from the sections preceding it because the authors discuss theory and insights from related perspectives, like humanist learning (Rene V. Arcilla, chapter 10), hermeneutic phenomenology (Giuseppina D'Addelfio, chapter 11), systems thinking (Saskia Eschenbacher, chapter 12) and biographical research and Bateson's learning concept (Heide von Felden, chapter 13).

⁴ Holzkamp, K. (1993). *Lernen. Subjektwissenschaftliche Grundlegung* [Learning: A subject-scientific foundation]. Frankfurt/New York, NY: Campus..

⁵ Koller, H.-C. (2012). *Bildung anders denken: Einführung in die Theorie transformatorischer Bildungsprozesse* [Thinking education differently: Introduction to the theory of transformational educational processes]. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

⁶ Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5–12.

Section 5 – consisting of six contributions – is of particular interest, because it goes into the role of “the other” in *Bildung* and transformative learning. In this section, the background of the authors is for the first time quite diverse. Moreover, the contributions in this section are less theoretical or analytical and a little more oriented towards reality of practice. Finally, the authors of these contributions seem to go more beyond their original rational preferences than the authors featured in earlier sections, to let *Bildung* and transformative learning meet. In chapter 14, Jerome Enau (French) questions the combination of individuation and socialisation, in which concerns for the self come together with concerns for the other (transformation through formation), considering that the final purpose of all education (*Bildung*) is the continual need for (re)construct democracy. In chapter 15, Knud Illeris (Danish) advocates the hypothesis that the concept of transformative learning comprises all learning which implies changes in the learner’s sense of identity. For Illeris, identity includes cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of the personal mental area (not discussing the goal of learning). By contrast, Elizabeth Lange and Barbara Solarz (Canadian) in chapter 16 define a sort of re-narration of a moral self through learning for relational power aimed at reviving solidarity and deliberative democracy. In chapter 17, Olutoyin Mejiuni (Nigerian) tries to give a coherent meaning to collective transformative learning through insights from historical material in existing literature (in combination with anecdotal evidence and own experience). The title of Linden West’s (England) chapter (18) is “Love actually”. This contribution goes into the concept of recognition enabling (open) spaces in which the most animated, unrestrained interplay of selves is made possible (enhancing TL or *Bildung*). In the final contribution to this section (chapter 19), Christine Zeuner (Germany) compares transformative learning and critical educational theory to answer the question whether they are more or less the same. And they aren’t. Transformative learning is more practical, in particular in the role of the other – in this case the adult educator.

In the penultimate section, three authors (from Canada, Switzerland and Germany) contextualise TL and *Bildung* in times of lifelong learning, issuing the transition to adulthood (Amanda Benjamin and Sarah B. Crymble, chapter 20), the globalised world (Philipp Gonon, chapter 21) and the lifelong learning discourse worldwide (Christiane Hof, chapter 22).

The final section, which comprises seven contributions (from Germany, Italy, Germany, Germany, Greece, USA, Italy) has the common intention of fostering TL and *Bildung*. These contributions are of most interest, because they really address either the gap between theorising and practising (personal) change or the engaged meeting between the two approaches of learning and development. It is at this point that both TL and *Bildung* come alive through topics like leadership development (Rolf Arnold and Thomas Prescher, chapter 23), parent training experiences (Antonio Bellingeri, chapter 24), dialogical writing (Kirstin Bromberg, chapter 25), arts education (Marion Fleige, chapter 26), aesthetic experience (Alexis Kokkos, chapter 27), pilgrimage (Elizabeth J. Tisdell, chapter 28) and narrating migration (Maria Vinciguerra, chapter 29). In this final section it becomes (again) clear that TL is more something that somehow “happens” (with some help), while *Bildung* is a

mental exercise of interested people inquiring and theorising on how, what and why something may, should or could happen.

The book ends with an afterword written by the three editors. I do advise future buyers and readers of *Transformative Learning Meets Bildung* to begin by reading this afterword. The reason for this advice lies in the overwhelming number of, and high variability in, the chapters of the book. The volume asks a lot from its readers. In particular, the many philosophical inquiries into the discourses of *Bildung* – albeit being of interest – are far from accessible to readers not so familiar with *geisteswissenschaftliche*⁷ methodology or with the conceptualisation of *Bildung*.

I also want to challenge the conclusion of the editors in their afterword. First, while I do share their excitement regarding the vitality in many of the contributions, I see fewer theoretical and conceptual similarities within the contributions across TL and *Bildung*. There is hardly any empirical basis for the *Bildung* claims, and moreover the future empirical research they propose would still not ever be enough to overcome the fundamental differences in terms of goals, basics and methodology (and in cultural history) between the two approaches, irrespective of whether scholars from both want to meet and co-operate or not. *Bildung* has historically become such a complex and multifaceted concept, also with value-laden aspects (not to be value-driven in the sense of not knowing the truth) that it embraces transformative learning by far. Therefore, I agree with an aspect of the practical conclusion in the afterword, but again with reservations. This conclusion “... remind[s] scholars to step down from their philosophical stoop and engage practitioners in what this profound view of adult learning [TL] means for teaching in the everyday classroom” (p. 382). Indeed, scholars’ collaborative working in their practice of *Bildung* and TL could lead to a “meeting” of the two (as envisaged in the title of this book) in the reality of practice, which might have the potential for transforming both. While practice is indeed value-driven, it is only through collaboration in work and learning that we may be able to become more inclusive persons with a more inclusive worldview. So, meeting and working together is the only international exchange that is really worth engaging in in the aim to explore TL and *Bildung* – which seem to be two sides of the same coin.

⁷ The German term *geisteswissenschaftlich* [adjective] is derived from *Geisteswissenschaft* [noun], which roughly translates into English as “humanities”, “arts” or “liberal arts”.