

Recognition, Democracy, and Work: Honneth's Radical Promise for Transformative Learning

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Abstract

This paper argues for a recognition turn in transformative learning (TL) through an engagement with Axel Honneth's recent work on social freedom, emancipation, democracy and labor. It reconstructs TL as more than an individual and predominantly cognitive process involving critical reflection. It presents TL as a socially situated form of emancipatory learning that emerges from shared experiences of misrecognition, indignation, and collective struggles. Honneth's contribution to establishing a distinct emancipatory interest allows TL to be reconstructed as a collaborative reinterpretation of naturalized norms and institutions. His analysis of work demonstrates how recognition, democratic participation, and social freedom are interconnected, while unfair and alienating work practices hinder the development of identity, learning and democracy. The paper mentions resulting pedagogical possibilities for adult educators that emphasize narratives, solidarities, mutual recognition and democratic participation, without obscuring the role of critical reflection. The paper concludes that TL can achieve its radical promise and potential when personal transformation and critical reflection are reconnected to collective action, institutional change, labor reform and social freedom.

Keywords: transformative learning, recognition theory, emancipation, work, democracy

1. Introduction: The Need for a Recognition Turn in Transformative Learning

Transformation learning (TL) theory has from the beginning (Mezirow, 1978) incorporated a wide range of concepts and ideas from many sources including Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and Jürgen Habermas. TL scholarship has paid little attention to more comprehensively mining these ideas as they subsequently developed and opportunities were missed to utilize them in the ongoing development of TL. In addition, scholars who were foundational for TL also continued to develop their own ideas but these have been to a great extent been under-utilized in recent iterations of TL.

Axel Honneth's work has had an impact on TL and his new books (Honneth, 2023, 2024) on social freedom, democracy and work are sufficiently original and import to prompt an engagement in order to explore whether Honneth's recognition turn in critical theory has implications for TL. This paper proposes a recognition turn in TL. This exploration leads to re-thinking the perceived individual and overly cognitive nature of TL in the literature and move TL theory toward an understanding of social emancipation and enhance the connection between work and democracy. This is presented as a view that overcomes the danger of interpreting TL and freedom as merely personal experiences.

Though some work has been undertaken to interpret TL as a critical theory of learning (Fleming, 2022b; Mezirow, 1978, 1981), it remains a worthwhile task to explore the implications of Honneth's recent work for TL and move beyond the original presentation of recognition theory (Fleming, 2000, 2011; Murphy, 2024; Murphy & Fleming, 2006; Ordóñez, Pérez, & Mallows, 2026; Son, 2026).

By exploring *The Poverty of Our Freedom* (Honneth, 2023) and *The Working Sovereign* (Honneth, 2024) a number implications are drawn for reconfiguring TL as a critical theory of learning. Three ideas emerge from Honneth's recent reconstruction of his earlier work on recognition (Fleming, 2011). The three areas are his:

- 1) Exploration of the meaning of emancipation and how it relates to recognition;
- 2) Assertion that a distinct emancipatory interest contributes to a fundamental grounding for critical theory;
- 3) Ideas on the centrality of work to both recognition and democracy.

This paper is presented as an antidote to the fragmented world in which we live. Adult educators will find Honneth's accessible re-thinking of Hegel provocative and useful in understanding the world today. Hegel is a

key informant for Freire's work (Fleming, 2022a), the work of John Dewey, especially *The public and its problems* (Dewey, 1927), and the work of Honneth.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Transformative Learning?

Transformative learning is a process of critically reflecting on uncritically accepted assumptions and frames of reference that help to make meaning of experience. Mezirow linked TL with the work of important critical thinkers such as Marx, Freud, Freire, and Socrates (Bloom & Gordon, 2015). He defined reflection, quoting John Dewey, as the process of assessing the justification for our beliefs. Critical reflection involves persistent and careful consideration of our knowledge and the evidence supporting it. According to Mezirow, learning is a process where, by reflecting on past experiences, we create new or revised interpretations that guide our actions. The meanings we rely on for interpreting reality are shaped by individual life histories and social influences, forming tacit belief systems or frames of reference. Transformative learning, according to Mezirow (1985) is the process of;

becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of our psychocultural assumptions has come to constrain the way in which we perceive our world, of reconstituting that structure in a way that allows us to be more inclusive and discriminating in our integrating of experience and to act on these new understandings... (p. 22)

The process of TL begins with a disorienting dilemma, an experience that challenges existing beliefs and disrupts established frames of reference. This can cause emotional discomfort or, as Dewey (1933) called it, an experience of perplexity: as "thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a *forked-road situation*, [emphasis in original] a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives" (p. 11).

When frames of reference cease to serve us well causing disorientation and discomfort, the search begins for the origin of non-functioning frames and for new better functioning assumptions and plan actions on the basis of new freely accepted assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). New and better frames of reference are characterized as more inclusive; more discriminating of experience; and more open to future change (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). The phases of TL are, according to Mezirow (2000):

A disorienting dilemma;
Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;
A critical assessment of assumptions;
Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions;
Planning a course of action;
Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans;
Provisional trying new roles;
Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;
A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives. (p. 22)

Mezirow borrowed ideas from Habermas (1971) in order to give his theory a sound theoretical base. These included domains of learning; critical reflection; and discourse. There are three domains of learning that match the knowledge constitutive interests of Habermas (1971) – instrumental, communicative and emancipatory (Mezirow, 1991). Instrumental learning refers to task-oriented problem-solving; exemplified by the empirical science. Communicative learning involves exploring how individuals express feelings, needs, and understanding oneself and others. Humanities and social sciences are examples of such studies. Mezirow (1989) states that emancipatory learning involves becoming aware of problematic assumptions underpinning either instrumental or communicative learning. The emancipatory interest impels us "to identify and challenge distorted frames of reference" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 87) through critical reflection. This emancipatory learning is TL.

Critical reflection, undertaken in particular kinds of conversations called *discourse*, are the twin requirements for TL. The rules for discourse, that Mezirow (2000) borrowed from Habermas, are that participants have;

full accurate and complete information; freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception; openness to alternative points of view: empathy and concern about how others think and feel; the ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively;

greater awareness of the context of ideas and, more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own; an equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse; willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgement as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgement. (pp. 13-14)

Like critical reflection, these discussions are demanding for participants, requiring emotional maturity, empathy, awareness, an ability not to be adversarial as well as an ability to think or hold different or even contradictory thoughts at the same time. It emphasizes consensus building; that may not be always possible (Mezirow, 2000).

3. Reinterpreting Emancipation: The Radical Promise of Transformative Learning

TL bases its understanding of intersubjectivity on G.H. Mead (Mezirow, 1991), Herbert Blumer (1969) and Jerome Bruner (1973), among others but recognition is of such importance for human development that, according to Honneth, without it we will not develop at all.

This paper asks what is meant by emancipation as promised by TL? For Honneth, individual, or psychological emancipation is partial and distorted unless it also engages in social emancipation. This paper argues that misrecognitions embedded in educational, economic and social institutions create structural barriers to TL. The highly favored public policy of lifelong learning does not escape this critique. Instrumental forms of adult education and lifelong learning, shaped by market rationality, risk becoming adaptive rather than transformative; emphasizing individual responsibility rather than social critique; and producing individual behavioral change rather than social actions. The kind of freedom and democracy proposed by Honneth requires that education foster the solidarities, interactions, critical reflection, and recognition that enhances participation in the public sphere – the importance of work will be addressed later.

Honneth asserts that individual freedom and self-realization are inherently relational and he re-defines freedom in terms of recognition. Freedom requires positive conditions for mutual recognition in the spheres of love, rights and solidarity, especially at work. His critique of liberal societies involves their failure to provide the conditions for realizing recognition in these three spheres. This is what Honneth calls *The poverty of our freedom* (2023) in which people are formally free, yet remain socially marginalized, insecure, excluded, and unable to thrive and exercise agency. Increased individualization, and commodification of social life increase the transactional nature of human and social relations, preventing the full realization of recognitions.

In addition to re-defining freedom, Honneth is interested in social freedom. This involves rethinking the meaning of emancipation. By implication this involves rethinking the meaning of the emancipation promised by TL. For Honneth (2023), freedom implies that all are free from constraints that impede their freedom and in addition, all are “granted an equal chance to participate in the institutional spheres of reciprocity” (p. 33). These spheres refer to family relations, labor market and democratic opportunities to engage in political will formation.

TL bridges these by affirming that frames of reference, transformed in TL, are institutionally, culturally, economically and politically formed and shaped in the processes and experiences of families, work and solidarities. TL involves a process of critically examining unquestioned assumptions that are developed in the contexts of social, economic, and cultural experiences. In each transformation there is an inevitable emergence of a group of people who develop hopes and expectations that cannot be properly realized within established institutional frameworks. This is the genesis of Honneth’s struggle for recognition.

We inherit from Hegel and Marx, a conviction that freedom of the individual can only happen intersubjectively. Freedom, as a cooperative process, involves a “we” and implies democracy. Honneth asserts that a person can only understand their political actions correctly if they think from “the concurrent perspective of a ‘we’” (Honneth, 2023, p. 91). This is what he means when he says freedom is “being for one-another” (p. 91). Other human beings are required for freedom. Freedom is realized in a community of recognition; where “one is at home in one-self in the other” (2023, p. 99). To rephrase this in the context of Honneth’s translations of Hegel: “one can understand the actions of the other as requirements for the realization of one’s own self-determined intentions” (Honneth, 2023, p. 99). In current education philosophy this sounds like a new idea; not so however. Dewey (1927) defines freedom as that,

secure release and fulfilment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others: the power to be an individualized self making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits of association. (p. 150)

Important questions follow. Can TL occur if existing legal and economic institutions are sources of misrecognition? Is emancipation well understood by TL scholars? Can disorienting dilemmas be reinterpreted as

misrecognitions, as moral injuries, as structural (rather than only episodic/serial/individual) experiences undermining identity? Disorientations resulting from misrecognitions are moral experiences, but they may bring about cognitive dislocations. TL has emphasized the cognitive aspects of these dislocations. Misrecognitions are moral injuries that undermine identity and motivate critique. This added layer of understanding, that broadens TL, is increasingly explored in recent empirical research (Chavez Rodriguez, Isopahkala-Bouret, & Järvinen, 2025). Recognition has already been found useful for understanding mature students returning to university (Fleming & Finnegan, 2010, 2014); the recognition component of the recognition of prior learning (Fleming, 2025a); the implications for understanding and responding today to radicalization (Fleming, 2025b); and as a sensitizing concept for school-based research in Canada (Martel, 2025). Recent research on migrants and other disadvantaged groups highlights disrespect, that also prompts TL. Misrecognitions are endemic in labor markets, and many institutions in society. Too often in TL scholarship, misrecognitions are psychologized and individualized (Fleming, 2003). This leaves the connection between collective struggle and TL under developed. TL is too often devalued, de-politicized, and a matter of personal insight instead of being seen as a collective struggle and conflict. The emancipation promised in TL is misunderstood unless the freedom promised is interpreted as social freedom.

Personal transformations are now difficult to imagine without including social change. In western philosophy and culture, the emphasis on individualism hides the social foundations of actions, making it difficult to imagine the social aspects of thinking and learning. For example, the political act of voting in elections is normally taken as a private, individual act. This can neglect the influence of social, economic, political and media forces on one's voting choices. Voting can also be understood as a collective process of will-formation; emerging, however unaware voters may be, from active discourses in the public sphere. Other political acts are also easily misunderstood as individual actions of isolated individuals. TL is, as a consequence, a shared social process involving a "we" (Honneth, 2014).

In Honneth's understanding of freedom, individuals are truly free when their self-determination is realized through intersubjective cooperations and activities in which other people mutually recognize them as capable of contributing to shared activities. The family, market, democratic public sphere and democracy itself are not just public settings for individuals who are free; they are institutions whose proper functioning constitutes freedom. Freedom can be and often is supported by institutions who make it easier or possible for people to follow their aims in ways that depend on and support the freedoms of others. It is not sufficient to have robust laws or other supports that enhance recognition. One may still not experience that one's freedoms are enabled by others in shared endeavors. This allows us continue to critique, as critical theory does, the actions of some in society that continue to make cooperative activities meaningless.

4. Critiques and Limitations: Ideology, Power and False Recognition

Critics suggest that Honneth may have over-stated his case as progress toward more recognition is always open to backlash, subversion, or co-option by powerful elites. Some argue that Honneth underestimates the persistence of power, and injustices in modern capitalist societies. Mohan and Keil (2012) state that Honneth may not, in his critical theory, capture fully the structural injustices and material inequalities of modern capitalism. If the impact of capitalism and power are underestimated, emancipation may, as a result, be misunderstood. Distinguishing genuine experiences of misrecognition from ideological inspired mobilizations and "false victimhood" can be difficult (Clavero García, 2023, p. 149). A false victimhood (a misrecognition) may involve claiming the status of a victim in order to seek compensation for injuries. Honneth's framework may still presuppose a quite specific, Western ideal of self-realization that may involve smuggling in controversial moral assumptions under the banner of "social freedom". Others argue that Honneth idealizes intersubjectivity. This may underplay how institutions and practices aimed at delivering recognition can themselves be saturated with power and domination (Markel, 2003).

According to others, Honneth, obscures the mediating role and influence of social systems with their functional logics and ideological influences that shape spheres of intersubjective action (Hiroki, 2024). Hiroki also asks whether ideological recognition has been neglected by Honneth and he imagines soldiers returning from war. They experience prestige and recognition for their heroic pursuit of glory and patriotism. Their deeds may however "serve ideological and imperialist ends" (Rutherford, 2026, p. 2). Honneth is aware of such problems and confirms that; "Far from making a lasting contribution to the conditions of autonomy of the members of our society, social recognition appears merely to serve the creation of attitudes that conform to the dominant system" (Honneth, 2009, p. 323).

Honneth's response involves restating his view that critiques may misconstrue recognition as a naïve moral idea, rather than a historically mediated struggle shaped by conflicts and institutions. If recognition can become ideological, this does not invalidate the theory. Instead, it illustrates the need for continued reflection on what are distorted forms of recognition.

5. Reestablishing Emancipatory Interest: Redefining Transformative Learning

In attempting to create a firm ground for critical theory, Honneth (2023) raises the question as to whether there is an emancipatory interest. Referring to Habermas's (1971) three knowledge-constitutive interests, Mezirow (1978) adopted this scheme for TL and with an epistemological leap chose to identify three corresponding domains of learning. These are technical, inter/intrapersonal, and emancipatory learning. However, Habermas made a significant revision writing that "the *emancipatory interest in knowledge* [italics in original] has a derivative status" (Habermas & Lenhardt, 1973, p. 176). Mezirow followed Habermas and stated that the "emancipatory interest involves a learning dimension of critical reflection with implications for both the other two" (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 72-73), rather than a distinct learning domain of its own. The emancipatory learning of TL is thus reinterpreted as an overarching critical interest rather than a separate kind of learning. However, Honneth now argues and restores emancipatory knowledge as a distinct third human interest. This allows this paper to re-establish emancipatory learning as a distinct third kind of learning.

For Honneth experiences of misrecognitions emerge from an awareness that norms and values that have been institutionalized are then applied in hegemonic ways by powerful people or groups. In the argument for a distinct emancipatory cognitive interest, Honneth asks "what alternative forms of action are open to disadvantaged groups?" (2023, p. 211). He responds: only actions that "advance transformative re-interpretations through struggles for recognition" (p. 211). Neither an increase in technical knowledge nor hermeneutic knowledge will deliver freedom from misrecognitions. In what may appear to be a minor question, this is a distinction with consequences for the epistemological grounding of both critical theory and TL.

Few critical theories have come this close, to establishing a firm grounding for critical theory, and at the same time describing TL. TL is a distinct kind of learning that attempts to transform hegemonic interpretations of norms already accepted/agreed by society, for example, recognition. TL is hinted at when Honneth states that when people are "denied appropriate recognition...their only resource will normally be to call onto question the established interpretations of these norms by articulating creative and more-inclusive re-interpretations guided by their own particular concerns" (p. 211). Indignation (rather than disorienting dilemmas!) may thus lead to radicalization or transformation (Fleming, 2025b). This altered version of TL emerges by linking TL and Honneth's work. The motivation for TL shifts to "indignation" rather than disorienting dilemmas and critical reflection continues to be the "essential element of all social reproduction" (Honneth, 2023, p. 211). The implication for TL is clear. This lifts emancipation to the same epistemological level as skills and understanding; leading to the possibility of offering three kinds of learning; a triple agenda for TL, even for all education.

The established interpretations of norms, refer to norms as socially accepted expectations, rules, laws and conventions indicating who or what is held in high regard and under what conditions. The widely held view that work is a social value is an example. This widely held interpretation involves valuing efforts of workers that are rewarded by wages. This norm can also devalue; when applied to unpaid work in society, for example, by carers. Often gendered, stratified by social class and racist, these interpreted norms are supported by their establishment as common sense in other words, naturalized. Honneth interprets these as needing what he calls "transformative reinterpretation" by those experiencing the resulting misrecognitions and exclusions. Is he referring to TL?

The "transformative re-interpretations of established norms as a recurring practice of oppressed social groups in all societies" (Honneth, 2023, p. 212) leads to the emancipatory interest as "a distinct form of knowledge" (p. 213). He assumes that "any social struggle involves conceptual and normative operations as well as outwardly directed resistance, insurrection or rebellion" (2023, p. 213). The emancipatory knowledge resulting from these struggles is different from that created and supported by dominant powers who support the naturalized norms.

Honneth confirms that agents of such knowledge (teachers?) need to first, learn/teach that existing norms are amenable to a range of quiet different interpretations; second, develop an understanding of the basis on which interests, specific interpretations are dominant within the existing social order (Honneth, 2023, p. 215). The route to critical learning and emancipatory knowledge is reached by increasing the awareness of the "plasticity of social norms" (p. 215). Oppressed groups have an interest in acquiring such knowledge in order to change and transform dominant interpretations. Educators must teach that new meanings are possible and that "rupture" is the way to break through the "natural interpretations" (p. 216) - the common-sense appearances of what passes as established norms. Dominant groups have a vested interest in not teaching these meanings and not searching/struggling for more inclusive meanings (2023, p. 216).

Emancipation, as an essential aspect of social reproduction and development, is characterized by struggles to constantly re-interpret and transform. Critical theory is a distinct form of knowledge and by implication, TL is a distinct domain of learning. Critical theory is nothing but the continuation, by means of a controlled scientific methodology, of the cognitive labor that oppressed groups have to perform in their everyday struggles when they work to de-naturalize hegemonic patterns of interpretations to explore the interests by which they are motivated (Honneth, 2023).

In order to change the dominant narratives that support social norms, what “disadvantaged or oppressed groups” must engage in, Honneth (2023, p. 216) suggests is nothing less than “co-operative re-interpretation” and;

to have become aware that such norms admit of a far greater range of interpretations than is suggested by the congealed form they have assumed. ...The semblance of naturalness that in everyday life attaches to any established interpretation first needs to be ruptured before agents can then jointly explore which new and creative interpretation is most suited to accommodate their hitherto excluded interests and concerns. (p. 216)

This de-naturalization of hegemonic interpretations of norms he calls “emancipatory knowledge” (Honneth, 2023, p. 215) and a “transformative attitude” (2023, p. 214). We can surely now call this the emancipatory learning of TL?

In contrast to Habermas, who understands critique as grounded in a rational, cognitive interest in emancipation, Honneth asserts that the motivation for emancipation comes from concrete experiences of misrecognition. Struggles for recognition, rather than abstract cognitive interests, motivate the desire for freedom. Emancipation is a response to experiences of exclusions, and injustices that are made public through protest and other activities in the public sphere. This leads to a different version of TL that previously emphasised (by relying on Habermas) overly rational conversations and narrow psychological and individual perspectives compared to one that now (following Honneth) includes experiences of misrecognitions resulting from racism, inequalities, prejudice and other exclusions. In leaning toward Honneth’s recognition turn in critical theory the confident assertion is made to re-interpret TL as not just a rational cognitive process but as a struggle for recognition inspired by experiences of misrecognition and the struggle for collaborative ways of moving forward. Knowledge, emancipatory knowledge, is grounded in social and individual experiences. An overly individual understanding of TL is a contradiction.

6. Critical Work Theory: Connecting Labor, Education and Democratic Citizenship

In his most recent book *The Working Sovereign* Honneth (2024) asserts that the shared, communal, co-creative, collaborative activities of work ought to provide opportunities to learn and support democratic actions. Too often, work hinders rather than supports democratic possibilities; with structural misrecognitions in education, and in the political and economic systems a ceiling is imposed on achieving democracy. When work practices obstruct democratic practices, political freedoms remain unrealized. Participation in democratic will formation presupposes rights and a fair organization of labor. Work and education are social spaces where people learn to work and solve problems collaboratively, and learn other capacities for democratic engagement. Honneth (2024) suggests that this “forgotten tradition” of modern capitalism, must be reclaimed (p. 26). His political theory of labor seeks to restore work’s democratic potential. Work and freedom are inextricably linked. As democracy represents the highest form of collaborative social activity, Honneth critiques how citizens are defined, or rather not defined, as workers critiquing how most theories of democracy “persistently ignore the fact that most members of their beloved sovereign people are workers” (Honneth, 2024, p. ix) Without thorough reform of the division of labor, neither democracy nor freedom; neither collaborations nor transformations; are easily achieved. The opposite is more likely.

As long as work remains immune or barred from becoming more democratic, the freedoms offered by increased political freedoms in society will remain unrealized. Work practices today have eroded the base of those competencies required for democratic activity; autonomy, status, and participation. Work should enable the economic survival of individuals, and allow workers to flourish - socially and politically. The journey toward a more democratic society depends on how work is organized. Work and working conditions can help or hinder realizing the freedoms promised by democracy. I suggest that Honneth is offering a framework for a critical work theory (Fleming, 2024)

If recognition in work is a precondition for social, political and economic freedoms, then precarious work practices, demeaning, alienating, or instrumental work are barriers to freedom. Work is a site for social esteem, impacting on the potential for a real democracy and its freedoms. People are free to the extent that they are socially recognized. Too much TL is psychological, individualized, focused on amelioration of alienating social conditions. This is not the freedom that Honneth identifies. It is a truncated version of emancipation and a misinterpretation of the emancipatory promise of TL. Honneth, by applying recognition to economic and political life, implies that there is a mandate to apply these ideas to educational experience. Education is a space that promises emancipatory learning. In his recent work Honneth (2023) systematically explored the educational task and process of increasing recognition and freedom by re-interpreting the emancipatory potential of education. This paper is prompted by Honneth’s statement that he had previously neglected the role of education in the “stabilization of democracy” (Honneth, 2023, p. xi).

Emancipation can be understood as the ongoing *process* of uncovering and challenging hidden constraints whether they are individual, social, communicative, cognitive or recognition. The task of *The Working*

Sovereign is to place work at the center of debates about democracy and associated living (Dewey, 1916). As long as work and working conditions are not infused with democracy (and recognition), the emancipatory potential of work is frustrated. TL will learn a great deal about linking TL with the experiences of workers in a neo-liberal economy.

7. Pedagogical Implications: Facilitating Social Recognition

The recognition turn in TL theory allows us expand the understanding of transformation that includes the pursuit of recognition as a motivation for change. Such transformative struggles enhances one's ability to participate in society. For TL teachers this iteration of TL, increases the emphasis on building trust, teaching discussion skills, forming solidarities and recognition. The addition of a recognition agenda foregrounds the interpersonal and ethical dimension of the teaching-learning process. TL may continue to be about critical reflection on assumptions, but this is now clarified as a process of respect and recognition; not as an added extra, but as an essential prerequisite for reflection, critique and discussion. Including a recognition agenda also involves emphasizing collective and social ends.

Integrating these ideas with the teaching of TL involves a shift in the ways in which teachers engage with learners. As rupture becomes part of the necessary pedagogical steps that attempt to unsettle congealed or fixed "naturalized" social norms, educators may have to expand their strategies beyond the rational cognitive analysis of critical reflection. A narrative pedagogy is a useful way forward for teachers. Hidden structural misrecognitions must be made concrete in visible sharable texts – either originating in their imagination or lived experience. These texts can be novels, poetry, works of art, or biographical telling of stories. These safe well practiced processes enable learners to feel safe, having externalized narratives that can be shared and explored with collective insight. This process helps learners move beyond institutional alienation, beyond the local situation and individual experience and reach beyond either self-blame or individualism toward a process of understanding de-naturalization, their validation of their own indignation and resistance. And the perspectives of multiple others can be taken and even a communal, collaborative perspective of the "We" that lifts individual experience into the realms of democratic will-formation.

Honneth's recent work gives welcome attention to possible remedies for overcoming the poverty of freedom. Social institutions that aim to facilitate and increase recognition should be strengthened by providing material and relational conditions for self-realization. Fostering and increasing social freedoms become an essential aim for education. Honneth's contribution connects, in the interests of a truly emancipatory society, integrating normative principles of recognition with institutional and economic reforms that enable individuals to thrive. The emancipation offered by TL is not just legal or procedural, it is an exercise in delivering increased recognition in all spheres (interpersonal, legal and social). The idea that freedom is relational, structural (social) and infused with recognition is the key contribution of Honneth. It is a critical theory of freedom. This paper offers an iteration of a critical theory of TL.

When people, as individuals or groups, are denied recognition across the three spheres of the economy, family and political arena they also lose the capacity for democratic participation. Honneth explicitly refers to Hans Fallada (2014) who in his novels maps the lives stories of people struggling to maintain respectability and acceptance, in spite of losing their economic significance. At the beginning of the novel *Iron Gustav: A Berlin family chronicle*, (Fallada, 2014) the protagonist Gustav has a surplus of social recognition built on conventional adherence to discipline, duty and mastery of his craft as a taxi driver. The novel maps the steady decline of his entire family as it disintegrates, in a society undergoing rapid economic change and beginning its catastrophic engagement with National Socialism. Gustav's domestic tyrannical demeanor cannot compensate for public emasculation by the economic collapse. His famous drive to Paris and back in his horsedrawn carriage is a dramatic and futile search for recognition in a mode of transport suffering from the rise of motor vehicles – without his involvement in such far-reaching developments. For Honneth this is a story of how automation is linked to a loss of power and identity by those not involved in making fair and just changes in the economy.

These stories are an empirical base for Honneth's ideas; not merely illustrating his ideas. Many characters in his novels have meaningless legal rights because of the way the economy works leads to exclusions and systemic humiliations. It is difficult (impossible?) to be both oppressed by economic structures and an active democratic citizen in one's spare time, according to Honneth. They offer a counter argument to Honneth's belief in the power of struggles for recognition where the public sphere is abandoned to autocrats, demagogues and oligarchs. However, both Honneth and Fallada's novels agree, that the search for recognition may lead to seeking recognition in situations of toxic masculinity, racial exclusion or (Christian/Social) nationalism. Other critical theorists have added more complex contributions as to how a transformative education might be facilitated (Kluge & Kiefer, 2026; Kluge & Negt, 2014).

TL might be facilitated in classrooms by utilizing structured activities that are appropriate for adults. In work-place learning courses learners might recall, write, or share experiences of disrespect, misrecognition,

exclusion or precarity and in group discussions identify the institutionalized norms and interests that produce them. In learning programs with migrants or in community education the teacher might facilitate story-telling, analysis of assumptions and shared insights about the system that led to migration or that might address it in the new adopted country. The intent would be to help learners mutually support each other through practical actions. Assessing such learning would forefront altered perspectives, increased levels of insight into how power operates in society and solidarities that emerge as ways of addressing problems.

I am reminded of the unique popularity of Christopher Nolan's movie *The Odyssey* (Nolan, 2026) where the epic travels of Ulysses are narrated following the victory at Troy. So many questions emerge for the learner today that can and are easily facilitated by teachers. For immigrants the epic journey by sea has sufficient material that must be a reminder of all how refugees are on a journey. The futility of war and violence along with the importance given to relationships (father/son, husband/wife, leaders/those led) will command the attention of learners and form a foundation for their own critical investigations. In addition, the role of women and the attitude of men toward them jumps off the screen and indeed the page. Athena, Calypso, Circe, and of course Penelope are a few of the women who flesh out a narrative of generative themes and insights (Hauser, 2025). I believe that all teachers have the ability to exploit the learning potential of this literature; all that is required is the imagination (and permission) to see connections between *The Odyssey* and the subject being taught in class.

8. Conclusion: Reconnecting Transformative Learning With Social Action

By linking the emancipatory interests of TL with Honneth's recognition turn in critical theory, the conclusion emerges that TL is realized through activities of reciprocity, democratic participation and mutual recognition. The untypical, concrete, and imaginative suggestions that works of fiction offer both empirical grounding and learning opportunities for TL is welcome. Fostering democratic engagements, co-creating better and more democratic social environments, by starting where citizens spend much of their time and energy - at work - these must be attended to and are supportive of TL. Small scale transformations in identity, agency and understanding are inseparable from larger co-creations and collective efforts addressing local and global challenges, including climate change, the rise of authoritarianisms, erosions of democracy, social inequalities, and institutional alienation. TL gains a theoretically rigorous foundation, framing learning as personal and social.

Emancipation becomes not only a process of "implementing private interests....one must be able to take up the perspective of others" (Honneth, 2023, p. 93). This is different to the "perspective taking" originally recommended by Mezirow as a form of empathy in the transformative learning process (1978, p. 104). Honneth (2023) concludes that freedom, real freedom, objective freedom 'is not something an individual subject can perform on his own, but rather something he is only able to achieve in regulated collective action with others' (2023, p. 99). Only by taking up the perspective of the "We" can freedom be achieved. Honneth (2023, p. 100) asserts that, Dewey;

argued throughout his life that individual freedom is falsely understood if it is exclusively understood as a capacity or possession of a solitary subject. Rather, the degree of our freedom increases when we participate in socially cooperative activity, because we are better able to realize our intentions and wishes the more various the interactions in which we reckon with the responses and contributions of others.

The entire project of democracy and emancipation, whether as presented by critical theory or transformative learning, involves acting "for one another" (Honneth, 2023, p. 104) so that the fragmentation of public life is addressed. Repressed groups can begin to liberate themselves, through cognitive mobilizations and mutual recognitions against naturalizing understandings of the existing social order that rest on frozen hegemonical patterns of interpretation.

The question posed in this article for transformative learning is whether it can realize its emancipatory promise in conditions where we experience increased authoritarianism and threats to democratic ways of living. The recognition turn that Honneth proposes for critical theory can, when applied to TL, offer a way forward and keep alive the possibility that TL may be capable of delivering a learning path toward a better future. This recognition turn for TL moves it away from individualistic and overly rational approaches to learning and toward a socially situated theory and practice of countering misrecognitions. Emancipation, as an established and distinct knowledge-generating interest, shapes the understanding of TL and adult education toward social freedom and democratic engagements. The potential for supporting transformative social change that lay submerged in TL is now foregrounded in this iteration of TL. This reconfiguring of TL also highlights the role of misrecognitions and indignations that lead to critical investigations and social solidarities that in turn may lead to social and institutional change.

The radical promise for TL lies in the way it transcends, without abandoning individuality or individual perspectives suggest how to move beyond these proposing that freedom is more fully realized through reciprocal relations and social actions. The full realization of freedom resides in the “we” of collective action and social freedom that reconfigure institutional and social structures. A reconstruction of a critical theory of labor and its reintegration into and with democratic ways of living is a fundamental outcome of this reconstruction of transformative learning.

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