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Experience and sociological imagination: Transforming the researcher's learner identity

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Abstract

Two research projects undertaken ten years ago explored the experiences of mature students' access, progression and drop-out in higher education, relying on Habermas and Honneth for sensitizing concepts. This paper explores the implications of undertaking this research today adopting a different set of sensitizing concepts and in the process transforming the identity of the researcher. To this end, this paper moves beyond Habermas and Honneth to the critical theory of Negt and Kluge as a source of new sensitizing concepts informing a reimagined researcher and research project. Their work on experience, its dialectic nature, imploitation, obstinacy – as an alternative to resilience – and a sociological imagination are explored in order to identify possible new sensitizing concepts for researching adults returning to higher education. Implications for transformative adult education will be identified.

Keywords: experience, imploitation, public sphere, obstinacy, sociological imagination

Introduction

The task of this paper is to explore and re-imagine how the researcher as learner may, many years later, inform earlier research projects differently by relying on different sensitizing concepts. This approach acknowledges the temporality of a learning life and career (see Alhadeff-Jones, 2016). The original research projects explored the experiences of adult students accessing and returning to higher education (HE). The theory of transformative learning (TL) is used to inform what is understood as adult learning – it too shall be transformed in the process. Jack Mezirow's (1978) researched adult returners to college while he and colleagues relied on sensitizing concepts (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978) grounded in the works of Fingarette (1963), Dewey (1966), Freire (1972), Kelly (1963), Kuhn (1962), Marx, (1964), Schutz (1970) and indeed many more

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(see Kokkos, 2020). Grounded theory researchers approach data with a set of what I call sensitizing concepts (Thistoll et al., 2015) for interpreting data.

During the original research projects work has been done highlighting how qualitative data was analysed (Finnegan, 2021; Finnegan et al., 2011; Murphy & Fleming, 2013). Sensitizing concepts were used when approaching the data as researchers rely on concepts that they bring to the research process – their epistemological position (Glaser, 1978).

The original research had three dimensions. First, the experience of the participants. Second, the context or environment provided by the educational institution and the public policy framework within which adults navigate their learning journeys. Third, the often-neglected frame of reference of the researchers and the clarity with which this is articulated. This third dimension, as it evolved since these research projects concluded, is the focus of this paper.

Two research projects are involved in this temporality inspired rethink. One is known as 'College Knowledge' (Murphy & Fleming, 2013). This Irish government funded project explored ways in which adult students experienced the power of the institutions as they navigated through HE. It explored the experiences of power, the power of the institutions and that of the students – their agency. The findings show that questions of equality and disadvantage in the university are not only about access, but also about accessibility – the experience of mature students as they progress through HE. It interprets students' experience as a conflict between the common-sense knowledge of students and the college knowledge of the academy in a way that identified the potential for collaborative and democratic discourse that provide possibilities of transcending the dichotomies of common versus college knowledge. Habermas' theory of communicative action provided a framework for this task, and the case was made for linking HE and adult education with the quest for democracy and a more just and caring society. Though HE institutions are indeed powerful in multiple ways, students are not without power and not without knowledge – common knowledge and experience.

The second project was the EU funded Research of Access and Retention of non-Traditional Learners in Higher Education across seven countries (RANLHE) that identified international patterns of retention whilst clarifying different understandings and contexts of access and retention (Fleming & Finnegan, 2014). The Ireland research unit identified the struggle for recognition as a sensitizing concept for interpreting interviews (Fleming, 2016).

Both research projects relied on Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth for sensitizing concepts. Habermas (1975, 2003) understands distorted communications as current social pathologies and proposes a theory of communicative action. Honneth (1995) identifies misrecognition as the current social pathology and describes a 'recognition turn' in his critical theory. His subsequent made an 'emancipatory turn' (2014). These turns acknowledge the temporality of their work providing precedents for making, what I call, an 'experiential turn' in critical theory. I explore this relying on the critical pedagogy of Oskar Negt (2010). It is his 'experiential turn' that led to my rethinking of the interpretive frames of reference utilized in previous research projects.

The plan

This paper maps a transformed set of sensitizing concepts by outlining concepts such as experience, its dialectic nature, obstinacy, imploitation and sociological imagination grounded in the critical theory of Oskar Negt. I will maintain the centrality of transformative learning as a potential framework within which adult learning may be

understood in, HE (Fleming, 2020) identifying in the process some implications of Negt's work for TL.

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge

Oskar Negt, who previously worked with Habermas, is a close ally of the Frankfurt School, an academic and active adult educator contributing to workers education in Germany. Alexander Kluge (2020), is a film maker and friend of Adorno. He explores the political and economic conditions of working-class life. He rethinks the importance and nature of experience; a study of obstinacy; their pedagogical method that they call exemplary learning that involves teaching with a sociological imagination. Before I build on the work of Negt (1971; Negt & Kluge, 1993) and Kluge (2017, 2020; Kluge & Negt 2014) I assert that we live in the age of experience. Never before, I think, has human experience been so central to how we operate in society and understand adult learning (Fleming, 2020). The previous research projects explored the experience of adult students in HE and Negt and Kluge offer new insights on the nature of experience – and its role in learning. I shall explore these insights before teasing out the implications for re-imagining research.

Experience and education

John Dewey called for a 'sound philosophy of experience' because education needs to understand experience (Dewey, 1938, p. 91). Today experience plays a significant role in public life and in adult education. Peoples' experience is expressed in the public sphere frequently through new social movements. Public protests raise the experience of citizens to the level of a public statement intended to express the demands of citizens so that matters of public concern can receive a public policy response. Street protests are a form of democratic politics from below in which workers, students, or other citizens express their experience. They express the voices of counter publics. Through protesting epistemologically marginalized people attempt to trigger a crisis among the socially and economically powerful – potential disorienting dilemmas for the political system and that may lead to TL. These activities area central and a necessary component of democratic systems, and it is difficult to imagine democracies without active and vibrant public spheres.

The theory of TL identifies experience as central, especially the experience of disorienting dilemmas - the starting point for TL. Experience is central to Negt and Kluge too, so much so that the slogan borrowed (inaccurately) from *The Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels (2006) saying 'Workers of the world Unite!' has been adapted and used to describe how Kluge and Negt (2014, p. 464) highlight experience: 'Experiences of the world, Unite!'

John Dewey (1966) defines education as 'that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience' (p. 76) and this includes 'organizing, restructuring and transforming' experience (p. 50). For Dewey experience is in *continuity* with previous experience. In pursuing meaning, new experience is modified or integrated with previous experience. For Mezirow (1978) 'a meaning perspective refers to the structure of cultural assumptions within which one's new experience is assimilated to - and transformed by - one's past experience' (p. 101). For Dewey, experience is also in *interaction* with one's broader environment (Dewey, 1938). Learning involves becoming aware of these 'interactions and continuities' (Dewey, 1966, pp. 76-77).

Oskar Negt (Negt & Kluge, 1993) identifies the adult education of workers as a way to eliminate injustices in the sphere of work. The injustices/humiliations that workers experience, he says, involve the absence of material resources (redistributive justice) and the denial of recognition. The experience of workers is the starting point for learning, teaching and developing his social theory and the experiences of workers (learners) are infused with the contradictions of capitalist society. The experience of workers as a source of 'resistance to capitalism' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 31). His concept of exemplary learning describes his pedagogy and this involves exercising the sociological imaginations of workers (learners) so that they come to understand these issues, take social action and alter the condition of workers (and learners). I call this recognitive justice - asserting the rights of workers to be recognised. Even though Negt and Kluge emphasise the impact of neo-liberalism their argument could be elaborated by including other social, political and economic pathologies - racism, ageism and sexism.

Experience is dialectical

In reinterpreting Hegel, Negt emphasizes the dialectical nature of experience so that then the connections between current experience and past experience are dialectical. So too are the connections between experience and broader social environments. TL builds on Dewey's insights about experience and forefronts the experience of adults as the trigger for learning. However, both Dewey and TL ignore the dialectical nature of experience. Peter Alheit (2020) uses an example from Erving Goffman to illustrate how the dialectic operates in society. In contrast, I suggest that soccer may be more productive example than that used by Goffman. Soccer teams are usually owned by organizations (or individuals), played by individuals, regulated by FIFA and supported through television and gate receipts of supporters. The rules of the game are changed in response to how the players and/or supporters react to these rules. If supporters get restless or bored, regulators may change the rules to make the game more satisfying for fans and/or players. Players react and adapt to the changes raising the possibility of further rule adjustments. The interactions between all participants are dialectically connected. Bored fans trigger rule changes, as with VAR, and these impact on the experience of fans in a dialectical interaction. Rules are not the only such mechanism as money, satisfaction, and even unconscious notions of pleasure or fair play may operate behind the backs of any participants.

Mezirow and much adult education theory has allowed this dialectical understanding of experience to escape their grasp. Experience is dialectical. This may have been a missed opportunity for TL theory that does not grasp this fuller understanding of experience as do Freire and Negt. In contrast, by relying on Roger Gould (1978) and other exponents of psychoanalysis, the opportunity to make TL more than an individual phenomenon is delayed. Habermas asserts that psychoanalysis is a methodological model of 'personal ideology critique' where self-reflection helps 'dissolve the pseudo-otherness of his [the patient] symptoms, which controlled him as if they were externally determined' (Jay, 1984, p. 479). The social dimension of TL and the dialectical nature of experience are misconstrued, and not only by TL.

Experience and its environment are also connected dialectically. An early phase of transformative learning involves making connections between one's own individual problem and broader social issues. This connection is dialectical and not only is the personal political (as feminists have long asserted) but the political is personal too. This fundamentally alters TL theory. A number of the phases of TL must now be reinterpreted (Fleming, 2022b).

Critiques of transformation theory focus on the way the social dimension of learning is misconstrued. We can now define this issue differently. Individual problems are connected dialectically with broader social issues. The political is personal – dialectically. This makes understanding one's problems or dilemmas and the search for solutions more complex than previously understood and one's problems are not comprehensively understood unless they are understood as dialectical. Connecting with broader social issues becomes an essential dimension of understanding experience. The actions one takes as the essential final phase of TL I now propose is also a dialectically interconnected set of actions at personal and social levels (Fleming, 2022b). Any research that focusses on the experiences of learners without making these dialectical connections is liable to misunderstand the notion of learning and in particular TL.

The process of re-thinking everything we inherit, defines TL. Thinking in this way, critically thinking, involves engaging with experiences of one's inherited world view, or lifeworld (Bauman, 1995; Jarvis, 2004). The educational task for each individual or indeed a learning society is to engage in problematizing (Freire) what has been taken for granted. Deep critical reflection requires that we learn to read the world in order to understand how personal and social experiences have been shaped by power. It requires that one perceives that internal oppressions and external injustices operate dialectically (Freire, 1972). I suggest that this is a critical 'reconstruction of the experience' of oppression, inequality, exclusion, and misrecognitions – all sorts and not just of workers, but of women, refugees, homeless, poor, etc.

Experience and the public sphere

If Dewey and Mezirow outline an understanding of learning that involves a reconstruction or transformation of experience, Negt and Kluge articulated how adult learning, when properly understood, has an essential link to social action. Their work on how the public sphere is socially and economically constructed, leads us to see experience as a more complex phenomenon and more difficult to transform. The public sphere has its own mechanisms for exclusion and an ability to hide its contradictions and exclusions. This applies to the public or discursive spaces created with learners in HE also.

As experience is of interest to adult educators so too is the public sphere and here, we make explicit the connection between experience, the public sphere and democracy. Adult students are political beings, active in the economy (as workers or preparing to work) and in the expression and formation of public opinion (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023). According to Negt and Kluge critical reflection on lived experience is fundamental to democracy and the public sphere. Negt argues that 'democracy is the only politically conceived social order that has to be learnt over and over, every day into old age' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 452).

Negt and Kluge (1993) argue that the concentrated ownership of mass media, the manipulation by state and corporate actors of media and the products of the culture industry based on consumption and entertainment undermine the public sphere as a space for critical dialogue. This involves the commodification, individualization, and trivialization of social experience. New social media act as the public sphere in the world today. Negt and Kluge assert that uncritical immersion in these commodified media may be leading to new forms of subjectivity, leeched of the characteristic of obstinacy – to which I will return later.

A vibrant public sphere is essential for democracy and adult education has a powerful role in developing the 'communities of publics' that engage in forming public opinion (Rasmussen, 2021, p. 15). The public sphere has changed significantly since Habermas

(1989) wrote his groundbreaking work in 1974. It is now digital, commodified and globalized (Habermas, 2022). There are counter publics representing gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and public debates are influenced by globalization and the commodification of the media. Democracy cannot survive in the current digital world without an inclusive public sphere and a deliberative process for the formation of public opinion. 'The public sphere is the site where struggles are decided by means other than war' (Negt & Kluge, 1993, p. ix). The HE to which students are given access promises many of the skills and insights that are important for engaging in vibrant public spheres. These ideas would inform new transformed sensitizing concepts in a re-turn to the original research data at the core of this paper.

Kluge and Negt (2014) in *History and Obstinacy* outline a political theory, using fragmented notes with a clear concern for and interest for teaching and learning. They attempt to account for the fragmented nature of the public sphere as well as the emergence of new counter publics. I suggest that lifelong learning and adults returning to adult education may form such counter publics. Negt and Kluge are interested in learners making these connections and learning to make such connections, by providing learners with the 'experience of learning to organize their own experience' (Pavsek, 1996, p. 141). This echoes Freire's idea of the student coming to know what they already know but in a different way. Or it could be described as experiencing their own experience, but at the level of political activity.

In their earlier work (published in 1972), *Public Sphere and Experience,* Negt and Kluge (1993) propose a programme for engaging with social institutions. It is what Fore (2014, p. 15) calls a 'spirited broadside' targeting the cartels that own and run the media. Fore (2014) links the media with a 'stupefaction of the populace and gross ideological distortions' that can only be addressed by 'reintegrating systemically distorted aspects of lived experience, such as labour and family, production and intimacy, into the public sphere' (p. 15).

Capitalism invades the Self: imploitation and obstinacy

Negt and Kluge (1993, p. 22) are concerned with the extent to which neoliberal capitalism exploits 'the inner resources of the living subject' and inserts itself into the identities of individuals. Capitalism targets the inner resources of the subject even though that realm seems to lie 'beyond the formal bounds of the workplace' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 19). Kluge and Negt call this collapse of the inner world of the subject an 'imploitation' (2014, p. 19) and that the 'colonization of the lifeworld' accurately captures the meaning of imploitation (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 20). This may have been a useful sensitizing concept for re-informing the College Knowledge research and would involve exploring the agency of students as subjects of imploitation. In contrast, obstinacy might better illuminate student agency and see students as active participants, making history, their own history, and indeed in the process possibly re-making the history of the HE institutions.

History and Obstinacy (Kluge & Negt, 2014) is a form of critical archaeology of capitalism within us, and echoes Raymond Williams insight: the most important thing workers produce is their own self (Fore, 2014, p. 22). As Negt and Kluge explore how capitalism inserts itself into the self they (Kluge & Negt, 2014) go on to 'extend this analysis all the way down to the lowest strata of unconscious thought and cellular light' (p. 22). Exploring the human psyche using phenomenology, systems theory, evolutionary science, and psychoanalysis they identify how the outside world governs the inner world and establishes powerful forces of motivation and feelings. But in spite of these negative

consequences there is a basic obstinacy that does not get imploited. This has implications for interpreting student interviews. The researcher might now use or explore, as sensitizing concepts, the obstinacy of returning students who gain access to HE.

The insights of Negt emphasise the capabilities of humans and how these are channelled, subsumed, and constrained in any given sociohistorical context. Kluge and Negt (2014) also argue that a theory of capitalism is required that will help understand the current situation, and grasp how labour capacities are being developed, repressed, and fragmented. Today 'there is no remnant of humanity in capitalism' (Negt as cited in Knödler-Bunte et al., 2014, p. 60), and capitalism has migrated into the depths of our inner lives (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023). The intensification of this instrumental logic has created greater material abundance, but with less control over it (Knödler-Bunte et al., 2014).

Negt and Kluge, have concluded that people have a capacity for self-regulation and collaboration in everyday experience that has explosive potential. This is not unlike Honneth's struggle for recognition. Kluge and Negt (2014) are interested in obstinacy that 'develops out of a resistance to primitive expropriation' (p. 390) and workers (adult learners) in capitalist systems meet every process of violent expropriation with what they call acts of intransigent wilfulness, that is the basis of resistance, subversion, and creativity. They call this obstinacy. This is capacity to assert human value in the face of exploitation and misrecognitions and is the basis for a pedagogy of unblocking. It is a way of asserting (post Honneth) that in adult education the learner, in contact with their own experience, may be able to grasp the possibilities of learning transformatively (Fleming, 2022a). This is not easy. This is echoed in the title of Kluge's (2017) book *Drilling through hard boards.* But it keeps alive the possibility and hope that there is a human capacity capable of emancipatory actions. This task is equally challenging for adult educators and researchers who must learn not only to engage in communicative action but develop (learn) the ability to explore history, political economy, psychoanalysis and indeed the theory of capitalism.

Pavsek (1996), in his study of the redemption of work, defines obstinacy as 'the resistance which labour power exerts against its reductive constitution as commodity' (p. 147). It resides in the power of the collaborations of workers which are ways of overcoming the dislocations of the social and involve combining skills, desires and identities that arise through cooperations. These resulting new forms of relationality can be interpreted as preconfigurations of utopian ways of relating (Pavsek, 1996, p. 153). This involves learning. In addition, it is possible that forms of racism, sexism may also trigger new forms of solidarity and relationality that prefigure more liberating ways of being in the world.

Obstinacy could be a form of will-fullness, self-will, dogged determination, or a myriad of other phrases that express basic stubbornness. These synonyms scarcely capture the obstinacy that Kluge calls 'the guerrilla warfare of the mind' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 36). Grimm's shortest tale, *The Obstinate Child* is told by Kluge & Negt (2014, pp. 292-294). The obstinate child whose God got no pleasure in her, falls ill, dies and is buried (see Kluge, 2015). However, the child continues to raise their arm above the grave indicating how stubbornness continues in and through the afterlife 'defying the authority and will of the society that seeks to repress them' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 37). Kluge is known for producing movies with female characters who portray obstinacy. This reservoir of resistance and agency was not explored in College Knowledge.

Rethinking the research agenda

I have identified a new pallet of sensitizing concepts that could have replaced those borrowed from Habermas and Honneth in approaching previous research projects. The idea of a university, the understanding of what is meant by adult learning, as well as the pursuit of recognition all served the previous projects well. Without retelling that narrative, I now suggest, without undermining the previous research, a new set of ideas. In addition to the theory of TL there are now powerful concepts from Negt (and Kluge) including their understanding of the public sphere, imploitation by capitalism as well as the counter balance of obstinacy.

The College Knowledge research might have explored the experiences of students or staff as workers in HE. The labour of staff and students was previously relegated to the arena of individual choice, students selected their own careers but within parameters pre-defined by the provider, government policies, and the economy. Two aspects of these new ideas are relevant for re-interpreting previous research. One is the potential to explore the deep colonization as experienced by students (and staff). How might it arise in interviews? How could the impact of the neo-liberal university be discovered in the experiences of students? The same institution that promises critical learning, that promises to teach how to think critically and how to make the world a better place, may be unable to deliver these very promises as it is colonized or imploited as it attempts to create public spheres and seminars. Are there possibilities for interpreting interviews with students who may be part of counter publics, within or outside universities? Other obvious pathologies of society such as racism and sexism could be explored also. This may result in a stronger sense of the barriers to learning and TL.

The RANLHE (Merrill & Johnston, 2011) research project could also bring different sensitizing concepts to the data. HE facilitates the process of bringing previously private issues into the public sphere. This is not easily accommodated in HE that has traditionally obstructed, denied or devalued this view of learners utilizing abstract and impersonal language in students' writings as well as administrative ways of assessing students. That is the genesis of the concept of college knowledge. Teaching methods and assessment requirements of college may block the learning potential of experience. Unblocking would offer a critical insight into the ways in which the inner person may be decolonized from the system. A rethought-out research project might look for experiences where students found or were taught how to find spaces of authentic critical thought, insight or action. It might explore how students from their own history carried the elements of obstinacy through their access journeys and studies. What stories would they tell? Would they be heard (interpreted) differently now? With the assistance of Negt and Kluge the private worlds of subjects become political and the political (social, institutional) is exposed as a weight on the personal. Hidden realms of production may be revealed that are in need of exploration and unblocking through student interviews. The unblocking might be connected to the impact of TL experiences or the critical pedagogy of Freire. In a more eloquent passage Kluge and Negt (2014, p. 20) outline the depth of the issue:

> In the same way that the Western mindset of the early nineteenth century thought that 'empty' continents inhabited by indigenous peoples were all that was left on earth to colonize, today, the enormous continents within the subjective landscape of the human appear uncultivated and unpopulated. (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 20)

The research might today explore two other aspects of this re-think. One involves the extent to which capitalism is within each student. The second is the empirical foundation for obstinacy. How do students succeed? Our research found in students a determination

to search for recognition, to overcome adversity (financial) and make up for opportunities lost at school and in a gendered society.

Capitalism is understood as taking up residence in the inner space of learners, establishing new locations in the mind and psyche of learners (of staff too). If this were a sensitizing concept for research one might find in the narratives of returning students the extent to which they are part of this narrative and find in university, the confirmation of a capitalist mindset and values. The same system of education that offers access to learners, the teaching of critical thinking and really useful knowledge may block exactly the freedom it was designed to offer. But all is not lost. Kluge and Negt identify a deeply hidden but nevertheless powerful obstinacy in the human person. The research of College Knowledge interpreted this as resilience. The complicating factor of Marx's insight about the thoroughness of alienation should also not be forgotten (Marx, 1964). It can be argued that nothing – mind, heart, unconscious – escape the process of colonization.

But today it might be interesting to suppose there is an obstinacy that feeds the conviction that in spite of messages delivered through the culture, through the dominant economic apparatus, through family and gendered experiences, learners may have hidden capacities to find motivation from a different place – a place hidden in one's bones so to speak. Their obstinacy!

Broader implications for re-framing learning theory

In this age of experience Kluge and Negt assert that experience takes shape through a 'series of necessary distortions' (2014, p. 31). Adult education accepts this in broad terms but the depths of the invasion (or imploitation) escape the attention of many theories of learning, e.g., Mezirow. Emancipatory power as understood by Freire and Mezirow is invested in experience and critical reflection. It may be a great deal more complex. For Kluge and Negt, experience is always distorted, even when used as a basis for learning – 'It is not given but hard-won, assembled through labour' (2014, p. 31). One has to become a worker for one's own emancipation in a world where the very potential of work has been distorted. Of course, learning and teaching are forms of work too.

Habermas is a neglected contributor to how we understand learning in society. In addition to writing (1970) about the role of universities in society he adopted the basic theorem that 'subjects capable of speech and action, who can be affected by reasons, can learn – and in the long run even, "cannot not learn"' (Habermas, 2003, p. 8). He holds that

> the fundamental mechanism for social evolution in general is to be found in an automatic inability not to learn. Not learning, but not-learning is the phenomenon that calls for explanation at the socio-cultural level of development. Therein lies, if you will, the rationality of man. (Habermas, 1975, p. 15)

Kluge adds: 'Nobody can learn not to learn' (as cited in Langston, 2010, p. 281) – a restatement of Habermas saying that we cannot not learn. Habermas built on intersubjective dialogue; Honneth on intersubjectivity with recognition; Kluge and Negt assert the primacy of the individual thinker whose experience is dialectical and obstinate (Langston, 2010, p. 285). Learning may be an expression of obstinacy! *History and Obstinacy* (Kluge & Negt, 2014) is a fragmented presentation of many ideas, but the authors insist that there is a 'natural ability to think' (Langston, 2010, p. 286) – to learn, to transform. The positive outcome from the perspective of the researcher can highlight the learning worker, the agentic learner and the working learner – the person always learning.

Toward a pedagogy of social imagination

Unlike transformation theory, Negt proposes a curriculum or list of competences that are essential for his concept of exemplary learning. There are competences involved; Identity; historical; social justice (or awareness); technological; ecological and economic (Negt, 2010, pp. 218-234). His curriculum (Zeuner, 2013) links the learners' individual experiences (including misrecognitions and injustices) with broader social issues; investigates and explores the interconnections in order to see how individual experiences and structural issues in the social environment are connected – dialectically. For example, the experiences behind the Black Lives Matter movement's objections to police brutality are connected to systemic, historical, economic racism and slavery – forms of systematic/social/historical misrecognitions undermining individual and social self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (Honneth, 1995). This meta-learning and along with dialectical thinking are of 'fundamental importance' for a Negt's critical pedagogy (1993, p. 661). By accepting these ideas, a different set of sensitizing concepts emerges with which one might explore the knowledge, skills and competences offered to students by universities and how it is experienced by learners. When experience is understood as dialectic and influenced by social structures there is then the possibility of what both Paulo Freire and Maxine Greene call break-through moments. These moments can, by exercising one's sociological imagination, lead to social transformation (Negt, 1971; Negt & Kluge, 1993).

Negt and Kluge systematically present materials and suggestions as to how their ideas might be utilised in learning situations (Kluge & Negt, 2014; Negt & Kluge, 1993). They use science fiction, and a range of innovative materials to support and enhance the social imagination of learners (Negt & Kluge, 1993). When a transformative pedagogy of learning is discussed, whether thinking of struggling with a global pandemic, racism or climate change, we benefit from extending transformative pedagogy by adding their dialectical process. Using science fiction, satire, fragments of literature, film, and documentaries Negt encourages critical intelligence and a sociological imagination. Kluge and Negt (2014) collect a visual archive of pedagogical methods for facilitating the exploration of how things could be different, building on learners' obstinacy and utilizing their sociological imagination.

How can we teach with a sociological imagination? Without repeating insights most often associated with Alfred Schutz (1967, 1970), C Wright Mills (1959) or Negt and Kluge (Fleming, 2022b), my response is to borrow a number of ingredients and create what I term a *Pedagogy of Social Imagination* and propose in a tentative way an approach that highlights the subversive power of imagination – a sociological imagination. It involves being wide awake.

> By the term "wide-awakeness" we want to denote a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements. Only the performing and especially the working self is fully interested in life and, hence, wide-awake…. This attention is an active, not a passive one. Passive attention is the opposite to full awareness. (Schutz, 1967, p. 213)

It involves being wide awake and paying attention to life and what is going on around one and exercising one's imagination. Imagination is the key ingredient in what I am proposing as an educational response to the pedagogical issues raised in this paper. It involves being wide awake and in empathy with others. Imagination makes empathy possible and we teach students to resist thinking that lacks empathy and teach to resist the monopoly of technical thinking. Transformative educators must care about the lived

experience of learners and their worldview and help imagine moving beyond what are familiar ways of understanding the world.

To look at art or read a novel such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1996) is to explore highly political possibilities of dystopian or utopian dimensions. It allows accurate insights into the way things may be, as well as the way they might be imagined as better. To open eyes and ears and imagination to art will enable us to pick up the signals deep within us as individuals and as a community that knows that a better world is possible (Greene, 1973) – obstinately possible. There is no critical reflection without imagination.

There may be a crisis of imagination in the educational system that is preoccupied with instrumental and economically useful learning and managerialism's agendas. As a result, we can see how that system limits what is explored (Aronowitz & Bratsis, 2005). Imagination is needed to break from what is taken for granted – the project of transformative learning. In contrast to most of the literature on TL with its much-criticized focus on critical reflection, imagination is the ground for transformative learning. Imagination allows people stand on the edge of society and to think beyond the ways that power is exercised now and to at least begin to experience ourselves and 'know ourselves as more, much more that pawns in a game where the rules are already set' (Freire, 2004, p. 109). Such sensitizing concepts would lead to different perceptions of adults returning to HE and the possibilities that might emerge.

Conclusion

This project requires an integrated theory of critical reflection on experience that seeks to tackle inequality, exclusions and misrecognition, mindful of the dynamics of capitalism and alert to the extraordinary nature of human capacities — including, of course, obstinacy – including how to engage in conversations in the public sphere. I suggest that Negt, and Kluge offer useful mooring points for such an approach, for such a pedagogy – a pedagogy introducing and inducing perplexity, curiosity, thinking, critical reflection and lead to students who are wide-awake and active agents of social and personal transformation. The researcher seen as learner and exercising a sociological imagination can benefit from the pedagogic programme of Kluge and Negt – set of new or transformed sensitizing concepts.

All research is conducted with a set of sensitizing concepts and theories. As time passes, researchers acquire new and hopefully more relevant frames of reference. In this paper the possibility has been explored that a different frame of reference might have led to different conclusions and even different pedagogies. The idea that the political is personal is important. What may be new is the dialectical nature of their connection. And this should prompt new research findings, even looking at old data through a new lens.

Many of the ideas presented here are not new. With an eye on ways in which new ideas can be found in unusual places that may in turn be useful for engaging in a pedagogy of sociological imagination I note these words from an unlikely source. Bruce Springsteen, writes songs, performs his own music and has written an autobiography (2016). He captures in eloquent words the core of his motivations and interests. He says 'Dylan had deftly melded the political and personal in a way that added resonance and power to both. I agreed the political *is* personal and vice versa' (Springsteen, 2016, p. 327). In a more detailed statement he asserts:

> In my writing I was increasingly interested in the place where 'This Land is Your Land' and 'The River' intersected, where the political and personal came together to spill clear

> water in to the muddy river of history…. I thought perhaps mapping that territory, the distance between the American dream and the American reality, might be my service…. I hoped it might give roots and mission to our band… (Springsteen, 2016, p. 294)

The identity of the researcher is that of a learner – always learning, changing and seeing through different lens. The process of being a researcher may be always fluid, in transition, transforming and addressing different historical, policy and social contexts. The worker identity of the research may be in transformation, seeing things not previously seen or visible with eyes and sensitizing concepts transformed by the relentless progression of their own learning careers and lives, and in the process changing their learner identity, their worker identity. Nothing stays the same.

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The author declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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