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# TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND VALUES

Background paper on EAEA's annual theme 2022



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The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 120 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide. EAEA promotes adult learning and access to and participation in non-formal adult education for all; particularly for groups that are currently underrepresented.







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### INTRODUCTION

Why focus on transformative learning and education? In times of multiple crises that Europe is confronted with, adult citizens need to not only be able to react to the challenges but also to be enacting meaningful change in their own lives, families, and communities. Adult learning and education can support adults in the process of transformation by providing a space for self-reflection and dialogue with others; it can also develop critical awareness and autonomy.

Throughout 2022, EAEA together with its members looked into the concept of transformative learning and its increasing relevance as Europe recovers from a global pandemic and faces an energy crisis, against a background of ambitious objectives of a digital and green transition. The mounting global and regional challenges have also led us to question the role of adult learning as a sector, and the values that adult learning is promoting or should promote to foster change. The present paper will introduce the concept of transformative learning and its application across the adult learning and education sector in Europe, ranging from the theoretical background to the use of approaches that can foster transformative learning. It will also summarise key concepts related to transformative learning and values and will close with a set of recommendations on how transformative learning approaches can be implemented, targeting both policy and practice.

Our conclusions are drawn from a review of existing literature on transformative learning, case studies collected through the EAEA Grundtvig Award call, and results of the EAEA Annual Conference: Transformative Learning and Values, which took place in Mechelen, Belgium on 31 May.

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AS A CONCEPT

Transformative learning (TL) as a concept has been well-established and thoroughly analysed over the course of the last four decades. Mezirow, himself, has then further developed his concept, together with E.W. Taylor (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), which has ever since been followed up by many reflections, discussions, and adaptations as most recently, an edited volume by Kokkos (Kokkos, 2020) has presented the dialogue between transformative learning and the ideas of prominent educationalists.

Beginning in the late 1970s, however, initially, Mezirow had been studying women's re-entry programmes in community colleges, identifying a feeling of discontent throughout his research group. He concluded that this discontent is based on the fact that the women participating in his study have been experiencing a life crisis.

The crisis was based on the women's realisations that they have been constructing their existence, demeanour and behaviour solely based on socially prescribed roles rather than free choice. This, understandably, caused a disruption in their self-perception and approach to the world.

Against this background, Mezirow (1991) identified perspective transformation as the central process following this crisis through realisation and built his ten-step model on this observation.

Broadening his model to all adult learners, he underlined the importance of a felt predicament to the learning process. As the learner would be thrown off their regular path of thinking and doing on a fundamental level, such a crisis would be resulting in previous knowledge and/or skills being insufficiently or not at all functioning to resolve said crisis. "But this is a special kind of dilemma. Simply learning more, solving problems more effectively, or acquiring a skill or new behaviour will not resolve it"

#### (Mezirow, 1978, p.7)

To overcome the crisis, the learner will eventually go through ten steps of critical reflection, progressing and testing of new approaches. They will go through phases of trial and error and will mentally adjust to a degree that goes beyond "learning a new trick".

However, after over four decades of reflecting on and debating about TL, the concept has also faced some criticism. As Desapio (2017, p. 58-60) has summarised in his most useful literature analysis, four trends – as he calls them – can be identified when it comes to critically reflecting on Mezirow's concept of TL:

- First Trend: The alternative conceptions of the theoretical framework, refers to the relative vagueness of the model, a defined understanding of its central concept as well as a formal organisation. This led to the tendency to refer to and focus on the identity of a learner when discussing TL, opposite to Mezirow's original focus on the cognitive spectrum.
- Second Trend: Asking for the actual target of Transformative Learning, critics mention that TL does not clearly define its "thing", its core, or its domain. It creates questions on what could be addressed or manipulated to support the learner and/or a successful learning experience.

- Third Trend: Also, a consequence of concrete aspects of the model being left undefined, the questions for "What are we actually talking about when we are discussing TL?" as well as "What role does identity play in all of this?" have persisted and are yet to be answered.
- Fourth Trend: Lastly, many authors are concluding that a solid answer to "How?" is missing. How do we use TL concretely? How do we alter the learning setting we have so that it can accommodate TL? How can practitioners promote TL in their daily praxis?

Although TL has, as it has been pointed out, some vagueness in its concept, leaving room for individual interpretations, it simultaneously offers its own core approach as the solution: namely the use of the idea and concept within a self-chosen frame, with a self-chosen dedicated purpose and objective. Thus, TL will be put in the context of pedagogy, policy, and values within the following chapter, providing a unique view of its potential and challenges.

## TRANSFORMATIVE ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION: A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Regardless of the differences in the understanding of transformative learning as a concept, the pedagogical approaches used by adult educators that can be described as transformative share a lot of similarities. A recent report prepared in the framework of EAEA's FutureLabAE project, which looked at several adult learning practices described as "change-oriented", found that their most important common features consisted of "methods that facilitate interaction with others (...), seeing things in alternative ways, challenging the existing conceptions and attitudes, sharing of experiences, critical reflection, becoming aware of own and other people's attitudes, beliefs, values, and perspectives, and doing things differently" (Manninen et al., 2020).

Similarly, Kroth and Cranton (2014) describe discourse or dialogue to be "generally considered to be an essential component of

fostering transformative learning", as are "opportunities for critical self-reflection or activities to encourage reflection". Mezirow himself called for learner-centred, participatory, and interactive approaches (1997).

Practically speaking, such methods can include journals, role-playing, arts-based activities, case studies, group projects or debates. Participatory methods that encourage co-creation can support learners in taking ownership of their learning process. The FutureLabAE report includes a list of several methods that can be used by adult educators to foster transformative learning, such as fishbowl discussions or a social sculpture; Kroth and Cranton (2014) focus on storytelling as a method.

A distinction can be made between approaches that focus primarily on raising

awareness and changing behaviour at the individual level and approaches that emphasise the emancipatory side of learning. The latter looks primarily at the environment and circumstances of learning, as "education should above all focus on the kind of capacity building and critical thinking that will allow citizens to understand what is going on in society, to ask critical questions and to determine for themselves what needs to be done." (Wals, 2022, p. 179)

Although this may sound abstract, it has a very concrete impact on the conceptualisation of learning, especially when looking at the goals of transformative learning. What is it supposed to achieve? Who or what is to be changed, or rather, 'transformed', why, and how exactly? This question is inherently political and has implications for whether transformative learning is seen more as individual behaviour change or as emancipatory learning that is not directly controllable and where the outcomes, therefore, need to be accepted as unpredictable and uncertain to some degree.

"What a teacher needs to provide is a safe space and an understanding that if you go to a class, you need to focus on the strengths that people bring with them and all their experiences and skills. A good teacher reminds learners of the strengths that they have in themselves."

#### Deborah Oniah, adult learner speaking at the EAEA Annual Conference 2022

The empowerment of learners for selfreflection, autonomy, and self-determination, and the focus on collective consciousnessraising and action are central when learning is understood in a social context (Jarvis, 2012). This emancipation of learners is fundamental not only to design 'learner-centred' approaches and methods, but also to make learning fundamentally about the learners themselves and their scope and capacity for action. Learning, in this sense, is not only limited to methods and curricula to learn <u>about</u> certain topics, i.e., to achieve educational goals in a prescriptive or instrumental way, but learning ultimately <u>shapes</u> social, economic, and political life, thereby questioning, changing, revising, abandoning, and renewing learning objectives.

Increasingly, the topic of transformative learning is linked to that of the question of spaces for learning. Learning environments continue to evolve, not least due to the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Koulaouzides, 2021). Online learning environments, while seemingly more accessible, come with their own constraints in terms of methodologies, limiting the use of approaches aiming at self-expression, such as body or art-based methodologies.

The necessity of developing safe spaces for learning has been especially prominent in the recent discourse around inclusion. An Erasmus+ project to which EAEA is contributing as a partner. Safe Spaces for Learning, defines a safe space as "a space which, either technically or emotionally, is meant to provide equal opportunities, representation and communication outlets for marginalised groups or persons in an environment of respect and understanding that eliminate oppressive behaviours, recognise the struggle and cultivates dialogue." (SAFE Project, 2022) The project has developed the SAFE Learning Guide on How to create and maintain a safe space for learning, based to a large extent on a series of focus groups with learners and educators.

One key conclusion of the guide is that "safety is quite different than comfort", and that the feeling of discomfort can foster learning. Similar opinions have been shared by participants of the panel discussion at the EAEA Annual Conference on Transformative Learning and Values, who mentioned that to encourage self-reflection and for learning to be truly transformative, adults need to be challenged to leave their comfort zone.

# TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AT THE POLICY LEVEL

At the European level, several competence frameworks have been conceptualised in recent years, which demonstrate how a holistic approach to adult learning can have a transformative impact on adults' lives.

In 2016-2018, EAEA together with the Life Skills for Europe project consortium developed the Life Skills Framework. The framework aims to establish a common understanding of life skills by defining eight key types of capabilities necessary to be an active participant in life and work. Drawn to a large extent from the experience of the Learning and Work Institute in the UK and their Citizens' Curriculum, it emphasizes how the framework can support citizens to "develop these skills for different purposes and in different contexts - in relation to their own personal empowerment; in their relationships with others, including family, friends and their local community; and through wider engagement as an active citizen" (LSE project, 2018).

The need for a more holistic understanding of key competences did not go unnoticed also at the EU policy level. The EU's Joint Research Centre (2019) developed the LifeComp, which explores the Personal, Social and Learning to Learn competences of the Key Competences Framework. Although transformative learning is not explicitly mentioned in the document, several references are made to the importance of critical thinking, which makes up part of the Learning to Learn competence. Skills for Life are now one of the actions of the European Skills Agenda, adopted in 2020.

A recent policy initiative in the field of sustainability learning explicitly mentions

transformative learning: the European Union's GreenComp framework that was published in January 2022 considers transformative learning as being at the heart of sustainability learning, enabling learners to 'embody' sustainability values by encouraging them to reflect on their knowledge and values, question knowledge and practices, and act for change.

Since "transformative learning" and "transforming education" have also been declared the theme of the year 2022 by UNESCO and even a "Transforming Education Summit" was held within the framework of the UN General Assembly in September 2022, it can be assumed that "transformative learning"" will be one of the buzzwords in new policy documents in the coming years. What it entails, however, might differ from context to context.

"Reality is always more complex and interesting than we think at first sight. Transformative allows people to self-reflect and act upon new information. This is the way to go for big challenges such as climate change."

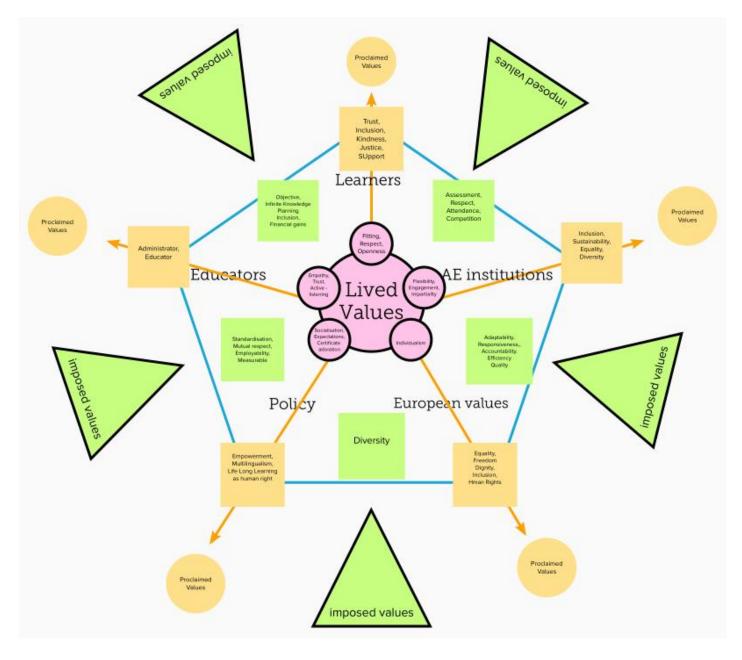
Rina Rabau, Deputy Mayor of Mechelen, speaking at the EAEA Grundtvig Award Ceremony 2022

Current uses of the term strongly lean onto the definition of transformative learning as individual change of behaviour and empowerment for autonomous and selfdetermined learning, but, almost ironically, in a rather prescriptive meaning; where they mention the emancipatory potential of transformative learning, they remain at a rather vague level.

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND VALUES

Implementing transformative learning approaches remains a political choice, and it cannot happen without reflecting on the broader values that underpin adult learning systems. At the EAEA Annual Conference on Transformative Learning and Values, participants discussed the imposed, proclaimed and lived values in adult learning and education. The discussions were organised from different viewpoints: of learners, educators, adult learning providers, and policymakers. "If we think about transformative learning and how it can change our perceptions and experiences, we need to start with ourselves and think about the values and prejudices that we have. Our assumptions are often very euro-centric and we need to be ready to challenge them." Laura Formenti, Professor of General and Social Pedagogy at the University of Milano

Bicocca, speaking at the EAEA Annual Conference 2022



Looking at values from learners' perspective, they are frequently context-bound and depend not only on the individuals but also their families and communities. Some lived values require engagement and support; balancing work, family and education can be a challenge, especially for non-traditional learners. Lived and imposed values can be interconnected, depending on the system, and include for example connectivity or selfdevelopment, but at the same time encourage competition.

The perspective of learners' is also closely connected to that of educators. While equality might be proclaimed in a learning environment, in practice adult educators might have their own biases, and usually, there remains a power imbalance between learners and educators. Giving up power is not easy for educators, even if values such as openness, listening or humbleness are proclaimed.

Educators see themselves as an intermediary between learners and society, and at the same time as both administrators and educators. They also feel bound by the imposed values, such as the necessity for having "infinite knowledge", delivering results, and producing financial gains.

Looking at the perspective of providers, there is a necessity for a shared understanding of values; proclaimed values are negotiated internally ad; the progress towards achieving them can be measured. While they can be mostly aspirational and seen as a good wish, more often than not they are also connected to what is happening at the policy level.

Financial dependence on policy developments is closely linked to imposed values: the necessity for impact measurement and quality assurance according to official standards or requirements of grants, but not necessarily to accommodate the needs of society.

Also at the policy level, similar issues were raised by the participants, who perceived the objective of employability and the practices of standardisation as imposed on adult learning and education: this can restrict the potential and the scope of ALE. Standardisation, and measurable outcomes, may hamper creativity and the joy of learning. The discussion also focused on the meaning of skills as a concept and related terms: upskilling, and low-skilled. Participants questioned how skills are defined, valued, and taught. Lived values: In contrast with some of the imposed values, those that are lived in the sector relate to the social and community dimensions of ALE, namely socialisation, co-production, and a sense of wonder.

The role of ALE in the integration, interaction, and empowerment of learners representing all backgrounds cannot go unnoticed.

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN PRACTICE

## Asking the right questions: Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen, Belgium

Kazerne Dossin is a memorial, museum and research centre on Holocaust and human rights in Mechelen, Belgium. The museum educates visitors on the historical events that took place in Mechelen and also plays a role in assessing universal mechanisms linked to racism, discrimination, exclusion, and group violence still at play in society today. In this way, it makes a fundamental contribution to the educational and social project, in which citizenship, democratic resistance and the defence of individual basic freedoms are central.

#### "In our museum, we try methodologies where we try to get in people who do not necessarily believe in a conversation; inviting is the most important starting point of a conversation"

Anne-Sophie Van Vyve, Director of Public Engagement & Education at Kazerne Dossin speaking at the EAEA Annual Conference 2022

In addition to running exhibitions, Kazerne Dossin also organises workshops and awareness-raising activities on hate speech and hate crimes, organised for example for the local police station.

The public engagement and education team of Kazerne Dossin underlines the importance of asking the right questions to learners and visitors, which will trigger a reflection. For example, during a project with perpetrators of hate crimes, participants are invited for an activity at the museum, and then a longer discussion during which questions are asked without judgement. This challenges people to get out of their comfort zone and start a selfreflection.

#### Challenging ageism: the Ageing Laboratory of the Municipality of Ílhavo, Portugal

The Laboratory of Ageing, coordinated by the Municipality of Ílhavo, aims to change the way older people are represented in society. For this to happen, it is necessary to debunk the stereotype that elderly people are in declining health and unable to face everyday challenges.

Amongst proposed courses are IT classes, creative sewing sessions, embroidery, gardening, and horticulture; as well as other activities: visits to television shows, and participation in theatres, choirs, and short films, amongst others. By combining a diverse range of activities, the project addresses not only ageism but also problems such as loneliness and social exclusion of older people.

The Ageing Laboratory is also a space where interviews and surveys are carried out and where different stakeholders can meet to share experiences and knowledge on ageing. The creation axis of the Laboratory hosts creative projects, developed by seniors and artists. It comprises a variety of arts, ranging from the creation of fabric items to drama and musical rehearsals. It is intended to foster intergenerational learning and a connection between classical knowledge and emerging sectors.

Recognizing the transformative impact of the initiative, and especially the improvement of the physical and mental health of its senior participants, in May 2022 EAEA awarded the project with the Grundtvig Award on Transformative Learning and Values (see EAEA, 2022).

## Empowering women of all ages: NAHLA, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Center for Education and Research - NAHLA is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation founded in 2000 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nahla implements projects and activities at the local level, in the field of adult education and social research, with a special focus on empowering women of all ages through education, networking, counselling and business support, faith and spirituality, health promotion and sports and recreation. Using the "transforming power of knowledge", NAHLA aims to drive change and build a better future for women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Empowerment is one of the main values underpinning the activities of NAHLA, alongside openness, cooperation, support, and inspiration, among others.

In 2020/21, over 12 000 participants joined NAHLA's activities in three cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. To better adapt to learners' changing needs, NAHLA regularly introduces new courses or modes of their delivery, for example by engaging the Bosnian diaspora in online courses, or by proposing psychological assistance for learners confronted with mental health issues. New collaborations are set up to support the most vulnerable learners, such as single mothers.

One key element of NAHLA's work is the focus on the transformative power of learning in communication and reporting work. NAHLA (2021) regularly shares learner stories to demonstrate the impact that adult learning has had on their lives.

"My message to all women who do not have the strength, willpower and who do not see the way or reason to open a new chapter in their self-improvement: Do not wait for motivation to find you, start learning today. Take small steps to achieve big goals! My example shows that it is possible to do that!"

Danira Mustafović, a participant in a Data Science training and career counselling services at NAHLA

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Policy level

#### Create an enabling environment for transformative learning: Promote strong structures for ALE at the national and regional levels, and provide better financing for ALE

EAEA underlines the need for adequate support for ALE infrastructure and funding. ALE should be recognised in its diversity and funding instruments should support this diversity, while giving support to the building of networks and cooperation in the sector. Long-term and adequate funding for ALE is necessary to ensure high quality learning provision and to enable ALE organisations to test and implement transformative learning methods with their target groups and in their own areas of ALE.

## Promote civil dialogue and the inclusion of the learners' voice in policy making

EAEA encourages policy makers to work directly with civil society in ALE to ensure a community-based approach to the delivery of ALE programmes. Furthermore, we urge all policy makers to use the learners' voice as a central element in all political decisions, and in particular to make the voices of people from marginalised and vulnerable backgrounds heard. This means using multistakeholder approaches in political decisionmaking processes.

#### Promote policy coherence at all political levels

Policy coherence in all areas of education and training is a key component to ensure lifelong learning for learners of all ages and all backgrounds. At the European and international levels, several policy initiatives, strategies, and frameworks give a direction to policymaking in ALE. Moreover, ALE also plays a key role in initiatives, strategies, and frameworks on themes such as digitalisation and sustainability. This reflects the situation of policymaking on ALE at the national and regional levels in many EU countries.

The division among several departments requires good and close cooperation between the different departments and competences to promote policy coherence. A multistakeholder approach in decision-making processes and/or the consultation of civil society in ALE and the learners's voice can contribute to efficient initiatives, strategies and frameworks that make learning relevant and help to increase participation levels in ALE. Policy coherence is essential to ensure political support and implement policies effectively.

#### Promote a holistic vision of adult learning in funding instruments, especially in the Erasmus+ programme and in the Individual Learning Accounts

The new central calls in the Erasmus+ programme from 2021 onwards have a strong focus on work-based learning. From a survey of EAEA's members on Erasmus+ decentralised projects (i.e., projects approved by national agencies), it appears that few projects on life skills and values such as sustainability, active citizenship and democracy are approved and that the lists of approved projects in adult education show a preference for labour market-oriented projects. The focus of Individual Learning accounts as a means for adults to access learning is clearly labour market oriented. However, these neglect important parts of non-formal ALE that promote life skills and transversal skills that are essential for personal and community development.

A broader and more holistic approach to ALE would be important to create more space for innovation and better respond to learners' needs. To promote greater social inclusion, sustainability, democracy and wellbeing, change-oriented ALE is needed that is transformative for learners and communities.

#### **Practice level**

#### Give learners a voice

Moving away from an instrumentalist view of ALE and applying an emancipatory approach to ALE means empowering and supporting learners to raise their own voices in decisionmaking processes. This can be approached from two angles:

- the individual level: learners are empowered to determine and direct their own learning pathways. They are empowered to engage actively in society. This approach focuses on the change of individual behaviour, trickling down into wider social, political, and economic spheres.
- the community and society level: learners are empowered to reflect on and question their (learning) environment, ask how their learning fits into overall societal developments and which changes they would like to see for the future of their communities and society at large. This, in turn, is translated into participation in decision-making processes and determining approaches to, methods and contents of learning.

However, while these bottom-up approaches are crucial for transforming visions on

education and learning itself, current systems of learning provision also require awarenessraising from the top level down to the lower levels of decision-making.

This means that, in order to create these enabling learning environments that empower learners, awareness-raising among policymakers and other decision-makers in learning systems is needed. While, in some sectors of education, participation of learners in decision-making processes is quite wellestablished, in particular in the secondary school and higher education sectors where student councils exist that represent the voice of learners in the institutions' decision-making bodies, this is a relatively new concept in ALE. Support from the European and national levels in establishing these structures is pivotal.

On a more practical level, giving learners a voice can happen through a variety of instruments, for instance through national or regional **learning festivals** where learners and their journeys in education take centre stage. Videos or (other) forms of broadcasting are generally quite successful in reaching broader audiences, but also decision-makers.

Learner fora are another way to empower learners: bringing learners together to discuss key issues and themes in ALE to develop policy-recommendations from a learner's perspective. These learner fora can form at all levels, from the grass-roots level, i.e., the learning provider's level, to the highest levels of policymaking.

#### Reach out to new stakeholders

EAEA recommends finding out in your own environment - i.e., geographically and within the field - which stakeholders there are and what objectives there could be for any cooperation. Is the vision for transformative learning shared? What concrete opportunities are there to work together? Could a project emerge from the cooperation, e.g., at the local level, or would a transnational project make sense, in which other partners are included? Based on these key data, a cooperation can be started.

As simple as it sounds, it is sometimes difficult to put this into practice - also because of a lack of resources in ALE organisations. We, therefore, also demand from policymakers to promote an 'enabling environment' where cooperation in ALE can thrive and innovation is possible.

#### Build networks and partnerships for transformative learning at the local and regional levels

Mapping stakeholders and building new partnerships and cooperation with organisations that have similar goals, can transform learning approaches and organisations through peer learning and cocreation.

The (informal) networks for transformative learning that emerge from this can, in turn, help organisations to support each other and promote capacity building for joint advocacy work. Furthermore, these partnerships and networks can facilitate cooperation with research and other stakeholders. They can also promote critical reflection and rational discourse, which are at the core of transformative learning. Going through these processes together as a network or group can be beneficial for the development of new methodologies, projects etc. and promote innovation in the sector.

#### Research

#### Connect the dots on transformative learning

In recent years and months, there have been a number of initiatives at European and international level to bring transformative learning and transformation of education itself into the spotlight. UNESCO in particular has been at the forefront of this with its process on transforming education which also included aspects of transformative learning.

It would be interesting to examine these approaches from a scientific point of view, to compare them and to see what unifying elements they contain in order to connect the dots on transformative learning. For policy work, it would also be interesting to analyse the significance of these processes for political decision-making and which interests are behind transformative learning and education.

## Promote research into the impact of transformative learning

Research could have a closer look at what transformative learning means for the learners and communities. The question of impact is key not only for financiers of transformative ALE, but first and foremost for the learners and the providers. What are the differences to other, 'non-transformative' approaches? Especially data on long-term effects of transformative learning could play a major role in shaping education policy and the promotion of transformative learning.

## Help develop methods for transformative learning

Adult educators are very active and engaged in developing new methods for transformative learning. A scientific perspective could inform these development processes, but also analyse and develop general approaches from them as well as draw general conclusions about the role of transformative learning.

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