The Hidden (& Not-So-Hidden) Labor of Transformation

CROSS-CUTTING INSIGHTS ON TRANSFORMATION PROCESSES FROM THREE TRANSFORMATIVE KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS (T2S-1)

Susi Moser • Closure Meeting, Paris • 16 November 2022
Overview

Re-Introducing the 3 TKNs
Starting Conditions from which Transformations Launch
Outputs & Contributions by TKNs
Difficulty of Seeing Transformative Outcomes
Transformative Labor – In Place
Transformative Labor – Across Scale
Role of Science and Scientists
Discussion and Next Steps
The 1st Generation
(2016-2019)

The ‘Transformative Pathways to Sustainability’ network
[Argentina, Mexico, Kenya, China, UK and India]

The ‘Academic-Activist Co-Produced Knowledge for Environmental Justice’ network
[India, Bolivia, Turkey, Venezuela, Lebanon, Belgium, Canada, Argentina, and Rajasthan]

The ‘Transgressive Learning’ network
[Columbia, Ethiopia, Malawi, South Africa, Zimbabwe, India, Vietnam, Netherlands, and Sweden]
Defining & Distinguishing Transformations

ACKnowl-EJ: A process in which conditions of injustice and unsustainability undergo profound changes towards situations of justice and sustainability.

T-Learning: Processes that lead to paradigm shifts which enable doing things differently, so as to successfully address ‘wicked’ (sustainability) challenges.

Pathways: Deep change processes that alter particular configurations and co-evolution of dynamic interacting social-technological-environmental systems; aimed at simultaneously addressing challenges of environmental sustainability, poverty alleviation and social justice

- Structural
- Systemic
- Enabling

Sources: Kothari et al. (forthcoming); Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015); Eli et al. (2022)
Research Foci of the TKNs

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<tr>
<th>TKN</th>
<th>Foci of Research</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACKnowl-EJ</td>
<td>Decision-making, economic security, community-state relations, knowledges, values, equality in all socio-demographic aspects, reduction of violence in all forms (direct, cultural, structural), collective visions of futures, objectives and intentions, practices and visions, and ethics and values</td>
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<td>T-Learning</td>
<td>Addressing the root causes of unhealthy resilience through breaking down inherently unsustainable systems, practices, routines, ways of thinking and the development of disruptive capacity and competences needed to do so.</td>
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<td>Pathways</td>
<td>Agency and uncertainties in choosing goals and direction of transformation; values, knowledges and knowledge politics, power relations, identities, system framings</td>
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From Where Do Transformations Launch?

- Conflict
- Resource
- Climate change
- Urbanization
- Energy scarcity
- Agriculture & food security
- Biodiversity losses;
- Poverty
- Economic development ("modernization")
- Mega projects
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<th>Country</th>
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**Unsustainable conditions**

- Conflict, War & Territorial rights
- Resource extraction & degradation
- Climate change impacts
- Urbanization & ecological impacts
- Energy scarcity & transition
- Agriculture and food security
- Poverty & its roots in colonialism, racism
- Economic modernization & transformation
- Mega projects (various)
- No specified, broad, or cross-cutting
Editorial: Understanding Collective Learning and Human Agency in Diverse Social, Cultural and Material Settings

Lanaree Obyit and Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Rhodes University, South Africa

Learning, Living and Leading into Transgression – A reflection on decolonial praxis in a neoliberal world

Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Dylan McGarry and Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Rhodes University, South Africa

Engaging with the Beyond—Diffracting Conceptions of T-Learning

K cabo Moshikane and Mutizwa Mwufute

Co-designing research on transgressive learning in times of climate change

Helia Lotz-Sisitka, Million Belay Adi, Gibson Mphepo, Martha Chaves, Thomas Macintyre, Tichaona Pesanayi, Arjen Wals, Mutizwa Mwufute, David Kronlid, Duc Tuan Tran, Deepika Joon and Dylan McGarry

Exploring Group Solidarity for Insights into Qualities of T-learning

K cabo Moshikane and Mutizwa Mwufute

The interplay between social learning and adaptive capacity in climate change adaptation: A systematic review

Le Thi Hong Phan, G. Robert Bashock and Arjen E.J. Wals

Transformative, transgressive social learning: rethinking higher education pedagogy in times of systemic global dysfunction

Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Arjen E.J. Wals, David Kronlid and Dylan McGarry

Think Piece: Intersectional Resonance and the Multiplicity of Being in a Polarised World

Injairu Kulanda, Rhodes University, South Africa

Capturing Transgressive Learning in Communities Spiraling towards Sustainability

Thomas Macintyre, Valentina Tassone and Arjen E.J. Wals

Southern African Journal of Environmental Education, Vol. 34, 2018

Elements of Social Learning Supporting Transformative Change

David Lindley, WWF South Africa
Concrete Contributions of TKNs

**ACKNOWL-EJ**
- Engaging in persistent political struggle, emancipatory movements, i.e. resistance and mobilization against the old and for the new
- Visibilizing the concerns of the disadvantaged and marginalized and oppressed
- Making space for subaltern voices
- Understanding and participating in the transformation of conflicts
- Defining, building capacity for, and working towards desired alternatives

**T-LEARNING**
- Not massive social engineering from the top down but enabling open processes of collective learning, so people come to alternative views and visions of the future on their own
- Internal change, empowerment, perspective change, enabling
- Transgressing norms

**PATHWAYS**
- Creating transformative spaces to enable and facilitate dialogues
- Co-defining the problem and co-creating the way forward through novel coalitions/collaborations
- Crossing differences and divisions
- Learning, visioning, working it out together
The Difficulty of Seeing Transformations

Transformative change is

• Complex
• Lengthy
• Deep
• Aiming at/affecting the underlying conditions of systems
• Happening for long periods in the dark
• Involving wide range of actors
• Happening at and across various scales of action

Don’t think the garden loses its ecstasy in winter. It’s quiet, but the roots down there are riotous.

Jalal ad-din Muhammed Rumi
Transformation:
Undoing the Forces that Hold (Unsustainable/Unjust) Systems in Place and Reorienting them Toward Life-Sustaining Ones

The experienced/proximate sources of unsustainability & injustice

The (mostly) hidden causes of injustice and unsustainability

The deepest causes and often greatest taboos underlying unsustainability and injustice

Source: modified from Moser (2018) and Shi & Moser (2021)
TKN Contributions in Understanding

Transformation: Shifting the Conditions that Hold Systems in Place
Six Conditions of Systems Change

- Policies
- Practices
- Resource flows
- Relationships, Connections
- Power Dynamics
- Mindsets

Pathways
ACKnowl-EJ

Source: modified from Moser (2018) and Shi & Moser (2021)
“Transformative Labor”
– a tentative definition


The mental work required to manage or perform the routine tasks necessary for maintaining relationships and ensuring smooth running of processes or performance at a job.

- To bring attention to an undervalued and easily overlooked form of labor, often done by women.
- To name and appreciate a kind of labor that is assumed, required and often exploited for “adequate” job performance but not publicly acknowledged and honored.
- To recognize its often deleterious impacts on the ones performing it (e.g., exhaustion, alienation from one’s true self).

“Transformative labor”

The work – inner and outer, visible and invisible – that is required to initiate, affect and navigate the difficult processes involved in transformative change.

- To bring attention to, appreciate and value, a kind of labor that must be done, often at considerable cost (and benefits), to achieve transformative change.
- Describes the various types and degrees of intensity of labor performed by researchers and other social actors engaged in transformative processes.
- To bring attention to those doing that labor in human and concrete terms; thus countering abstract, almost sanitized, often depersonalized and even dehumanized reference to “social processes” involved in T2S.
“Transformative Labor”
– a tentative definition (cont.)

• pertains to those actively involved in initiating, facilitating, instigating, fighting for, empowering, enabling and maintaining momentum of transformations
• others may benefit from this labor, even if they were only passive “passengers” on the move to a more just and sustainable world
• a service to society (maybe even the species) at large, even if it entails curtailing or hindering the short-term benefits of those profit(eer)ing from unsustainable activities and privileged ways of being
• is “Davidian” (i.e., that of the underdogs) in nature, performed often by those in marginalized positions (and their allies), working from the grassroots up rather than the work of those in elite positions working to “social-engineer” transformations from the top-down
• unlike “emotional labor” where work is performed in an extractive system so as to succeed in, but not challenge it, transformative labor is the risky and challenging work of breaking through existing systems
• requires creativity, courage, persistence and other physical, social, cognitive and emotional qualities and skills along with physical and financial resources needed to achieve system-transcending change.
Naming (Starting) Conditions (Symptoms)

Visioning Desired Outcomes (Purpose, Horizons)

Enacting Steps to Change Conditions

Fostering Agency & Empowerment

Creating Transformative Spaces

Transformative cornerstones
1. Historical & contextual complexities
2. Consequences
3. Conditions & visions of change
4. Interpretation & sensemaking
5. Responsibilities
6. Governance & decision-making

Transformative labor –
• Iterative
• Ongoing
• Non-linear
• Varied by type
• Varied by intensity
• Situational (necessary, selective)
• Proactive/strategic and reactive
• Adaptive
• Destructive & deconstructive
• Creative & constitutive
Transformative Labor – In Specific Cases/Places
Along Non-linear, Emergent Arcs of Transformation

**Naming Starting Conditions (Symptoms)**
- Unsustainability
- Injustice
- Conflict (in contextually specific ways)

**Creating Transformative Spaces**
- Unlearning & (re)learning
- Transgressing norms
- Inviting the missing
- Enabling dialogue
- Working boundaries
- Decolonizing minds, research practices
- TD research (co-…)
- Conflict transformation
- Visioning/developing alternatives

**Fostering Agency & Empowerment**
- Building t’ive agency (understanding, will, skill)
- Building & expanding networks of solidarity
- Community-based learning
- Movement building
- Challenging existing power arrangements
- Valuing all forms of knowledge
- Redefining roles

**Enacting Steps to Change Conditions**
- Civic resistance
- Movements pushing for $T\Delta$
- Innovation
- Changing curricula
- Changing practices
- Policy guidance & change
- Enacting alternatives (e.g., land use, governance, energy sourcing)

**Visioning Desired Outcomes (Purpose, Horizons)**
- Sustainability
- Environmental
- Economic
- Social
- Justice
- Cognitive
- Distributive
- Procedural
- Structural
- Peace/absence of violence
Transformative Labor – Across Scale
Linking Social Processes for Transformation Across Space, Scale & Time

Living Spirals

Networks

Murmuration

Image: T-Learning (Chavez, McGary, Lotz-Sisitka, Mphepo 2016; McIntyre 2020)
Image: Dice Insights; Use: Implicitly, activated and observed in all 3 TKNs
Image: Wikipedia; Use: Pathways (Sterling, 2022)
Role of Science and of Scientists in Transformations to Sustainability

**SCIENCE**

a. Importance and limits of what scientists do/can do  
b. Scientific expertise is necessary but not sufficient  
c. Decolonizing science as a way of not only transforming relationships but transforming the nature of science (?)  
d. Transdisciplinary co-creation of knowledge and transformative space-making  
e. Evidence of transformative outcomes in policy and practice

**SCIENTISTS**

Source: McGary (graphics); Temper et al. (2019)
Some Unanswered Questions

- Unsustainability
- Injustice
- Conflict (in contextually specific ways)

Initiation of TΔ
- Threshold of tolerance?
- Trigger events?
- Breakthroughs?
- Leadership?
- Windows of opportunity?

Mindsets & Power Dynamics

Relationships/Connections

Policies, Practices, Resources

Creating Transformative Spaces
- Unlearning & (re)learning
- Transgressing norms
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- Enabling dialogue
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Linking Social Processes for Transformation Across Space, Scale & Time

Living Spirals

Networks

Murmuration

Sources: see above

Additional transformative labor:
Horizon scanning • Alignment/giving up control • Horizontal communication • Resource sharing (incl. ideas, knowledge) • Pan-directional networking • Strategizing/working with scale-dependent theories of change • Advocacy • Reflexivity & learning • Subsisting on “invisible fruit”
Discussion:
Refinements & Future Directions

• Refining the concept and testing the value of “transformative labor”
  • What other kinds of transformative labor?
  • What purchase does it give us?

• Validation (or not) via the T2S2 projects’ experience

• Uncovering what exactly initiates transformative change
  • What is known?
  • Can it be known?
  • When can it be known?
  • What “signals” to watch out for?

• Deepening understanding of cross-scale connections & labor
Next Steps

- Inviting reflection from you
- Developing recommendations on future research needs
- Eliciting feedback from TKNs
- Completing paper
  - Report to ISC
  - Contribution to GEC Special Issue?

Feedback welcome!

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