

## Promoting dialogue for transformative learning in local communities: the case of a Learning City in Greece

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The paper explores the role that dialogue plays within the context of collective transformative learning. The case of a Learning City in Greece is examined in a period of more than a year, during which educational institutions interacted and collaborated so as to face the consequences of crisis at local level.

### Introduction

According to Mezirow (1994), the culture of the developed western world often blocks dialogue, as it focuses on competitiveness and the promotion of the self, downgrading the importance of collective thinking. In a period of crisis, in which a political philosophy of tolerance, equality, education and democratic participation is required more than ever, additional socio-cultural barriers emerge making citizens' participation in a meaningful dialogue even more difficult.

The framework of Learning Cities provides a great opportunity for research in the field of dialogue and examination of the relation between dialogue and transformative learning and consequently citizens' participation at a local level. Under the idea of Learning Cities one can find UNESCO's initiative which defines a Learning City as *'one which effectively mobilizes its resources to reinforce individual empowerment and social cohesion, economic and cultural prosperity, and sustainable development'* (Unesco, 2013). In this paper, we will examine the case of City of Larisa in Greece, which seems to use dialogue in various forms with an impact on at local level.

Concluding these introductory thoughts, the main research questions of this paper aim to shed some light on the discussion regarding the process under which dialogue can be used as a tool for collective development, which at the same time affects local communities, especially during a crisis period. The paper is divided into three main sections: the first one will deal with basic theoretical perspectives regarding the concept of Learning Cities and main aspects of Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory, combined with Freire's work on the issue, already being mentioned above. In the second section we will present the case of Larisa and we will try to discuss step by step the progress, which has been made so far. Mezirow's 10 stages of transformation will be our monitoring tool toward this direction. The final section will close with a

discussion on the main findings of this learning journey and some final remarks.

**Theoretical background**

In 2012 the UNESCO Life Long Learning Institute presents the conditions under which a Global Network of Cities can take place. The proposed title, Learning Cities,

bears in mind the Learning Organization concept. At the same time, Learning Cities highlight the need for searching current practices of development and renegotiating in a changing world characterized by an unprecedented economic, social and cultural crisis. In particular, the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities defines the main objectives of a Learning City, which include the following:

- Promotion of inclusive learning from basic to higher education;
- Re-vitalization of learning in families and communities;
- Facilitation of learning for and in the workplace;
- Extension of the use of modern learning technologies;
- Enhancing quality and excellence in learning;
- Nurturing a culture of learning throughout life (Unesco, 2013).

But how easy is that? What does a Learning City mean within the European or more specifically the Greek environment in the midst of crisis? It is clear that we live in difficult times. The fear of bankruptcy and disintegration of the social fabric is obvious. Austerity policies, recession and unemployment, subversion of everyday citizens' lives and forecasts for a lost generation. The welfare state dissolves and the traditional family support network gradually declines. The latest surveys refer to 1 in 5 Greeks that live in a household where nobody works (Poulopoulos, 2014). The outbreak of a humanitarian crisis is becoming more evident as thousands homeless make their appearance in Greek cities. Moreover, cuts in public health and welfare meet imposed neoliberal strategies of privatization of welfare services. International organizations, such as UNESCO, a long time before the outbreak of the current crisis, have pointed out that the welfare state is threatened by the forces of the Global Market:

‘Many countries are experiencing a crisis of their social policy which destabilizes the foundations of a solidarity system that had appeared capable of reconciling with a democratic manner the social, political and economic dimensions of society under the auspices of the Welfare State’ (Unesco, 1996: 56)

So, which is the reason of presence and the contribution of a Learning City within this environment? UNESCO documents refer to specific conditions, when referring to ‘Learning Cities’: First of all, a strong political will and commitment of the authorities of a city, secondly the involvement of all stakeholders and last but not least, mobilization and utilization of resources (Unesco, 2013). The description of the objectives of a ‘learning city’ reveals the need for specific educational interventions through certain processes. These interventions cannot be impersonal and unpolitic in nature. As Freire (1970) suggests, for education to be empowering, the teacher needs not only to be democratic, but also to form a transformative relationship between him or her and the students, students and their learning, and students and society.

Let's talk about politics then and the services citizens ask especially during a crisis period. Aristotle, some 2.500 years ago argues that politics is not like the art of medicine, where the skill of the expert is dominant. It is more like building and cooking, where the most important opinion belongs to those who will get the impact of that opinion, in other words the final beneficiary (Politics, 1282a). Active participation of citizens should be the goal of every political process. The prerequisite to effectively involve all citizens with active and critical role and recommendations that affect them in decisions making, seems to be the increase of knowledge through a dialogue that marks the journey to self-awareness.

Is, therefore, education and lifelong learning a way to address the current crisis? Are the traditions of adult education which appeared after the 19th century with goals of improving the educational level of vulnerable social target groups and was associated with the popular movements still alive? It is true that during the ‘90s

international organizations referred to the concept of lifelong learning as the key aspect for modern knowledge societies (European Commission, 1995 OECD, 1996). These developments quickly raised the legitimate question whether lifelong learning is a progressive movement or a threat to public educational systems and their role in the promotion of equal opportunities and facilitating access to knowledge (Illeris, 2002). International competition and the trend of decreasing public expenses -with impact in financing educational organizations- shift responsibility for the care and continuous education from public to personal level (Kallen, 1997 in Kokkos, 2005), while at the same time the rhetoric of progressivism, equal opportunities, general access to knowledge, is present in name of 'employment' and 'competition' (Griffin, 2006).

On the other hand, Freire and Mezirow are clear. From the mid-20th century the first one and later on the second, they both referred to an education dedicated to the challenge of social change. Freire talks about the progressive teacher who is political fighter (2006), while Mezirow describes an educator who is cultural activist, dedicated to the assertion of social justice (2000).

Freire was among those who highlighted the value of 'popular education' for the empowerment of socially excluded groups and treats education as a practice primarily political and secondarily cognitive, within the framework of a pedagogical proposal (1970). Freire also refers to a process of liberation, an instrument for the critical awareness where students self-evaluate their personal experiences, interact with the educators and form a critical relationship with knowledge. For Freire, education does not end in the classroom but continues in all aspects of a learner's life. Therefore, education is always political in nature-regardless of whether both the learner and the teacher realize their politics (Freire & Shor, 2011). At the heart of this process, dialogue is crucial, since it may help learners to search for political actions, in order to confront the repressive mechanisms: 'The following discussion makes it possible to re-reading of reality which may well lead to the engagement of learners with political practices aiming at the transformation of society. What? Why; How; For what purpose? For whom; Against whom? By whom; In favor of what? For the sake of what? These are questions that challenge students to focus on the essence of things' (Freire, 2006).

In addition, Mezirow also stated the need for the creation of those conditions for every organization, for each adult to acquire critical perspective and to participate freely in a critical discourse that will embrace all citizens of current societies. It is this kind of discourse that does not seek uniformity. On the contrary, Mezirow argues that diversification enriches reflection, trains the different perspective in tolerance and encourages synergies. Ideal dialogue conditions refer to ideal learning conditions, which although they have never been achieved in real life, they 'constitute a political philosophy which implies that tolerance, equality, education and democratic participation are essential conditions of human communication' (1994).

Concluding, the basic objective of a Learning City is common to Mezirow's belief (1996) that is creating conditions under which dialogue can help establish a sense of solidarity among the participating citizens. This belief can be well connected with Freire's suggestion (1970) about the relation between dialogue for praxis and social change. However, these are not easy procedures, since they are connected with concerns and options that also relate to social policies and the needs of citizens. At this point, it is important to recognize that a collective transformation to take place is much more complex and challenging task in comparison with individual transformation. In the following lines we will present the 10-phase model of Transformative Learning, proposed by Mezirow about three decades ago, and later on we will try to link these phases with the steps City of Larissa has taken till now, in the framework of its

nomination as Learning City by UNESCO.

Mezirow first applied the label transformation in his study of women returning to postsecondary study or the workplace after an extended time out. He was particularly interested in identifying factors that impede or facilitate women’s progress in the re-entry programs (1978). He insisted that critical self-reflection on assumptions, often dysfunctional, and critical discourse, where the learner validates a best judgement, are the two most important elements of the transformation learning process. In order transformation to occur, learner should pass through certain phases during a period of time. These phases are described in table 1.

Table 1:Mezirow’s (1978) Ten Phases of Transformative Learning

| Phase    | Situation   |
|----------|---|
| Phase 1  | A disorienting dilemma  |
| Phase 2  | A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame  |
| Phase 3  | A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions   |
| Phase 4  | Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change |
| Phase 5  | Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions  |
| Phase 6  | Planning of a course of action  |
| Phase 7  | Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans  |
| Phase 8  | Provisional trying of new roles   |
| Phase 9  | Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships   |
| Phase 10 | A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective  |

### The case study

The case of Larissa, a Greek city in the heart of the financial crisis of the last years, provides some unique characteristics of a community in action. The city, under the new City Council in the beginning of 2015, decided to invest on extroversion, looking for opportunities in the global arena, pursuing collaborations with the environment, while at the same time recognized the needs of socially vulnerable groups and tried to develop educational interventions for their support. In order to achieve this goal, City of Larissa cooperated with the Hellenic Adult Education Association, a non-governmental scientific organization specialized in adult education in Greece. A long term project was born, titled ‘Larissa, A learning city, in which lifelong learning was expected to act as a liaison among interested bodies and stakeholders. Since, this is a project in current action, the goal is to create networks of different institutions and organizations and provide spaces for dialogue, new communication channels and collective actions, which are expected to take place with a focus on local needs. Meanwhile, City of Larissa was accepted as a member of UNESCO’s Learning Cities Network. The vision, the strategy, the methodology and specific actions of the project mentioned above were presented during the 2nd International Conference on Learning Cities in Mexico in September 2015.

#### *The beginning*

A few months earlier the project had already begun with the organization and hosting of an international Conference on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. The Conference was attended by over 200 delegates, teachers in the majority from the region of Thessaly, officials and representatives of local government, institutions of the public and the private sector etc. During the conference participants had the chance to exchange views about the challenge of Learning City and discuss with academics, such

as P. Jarvis, T. Fleming and P. Mayo, who presented their own perspectives on the issue of a Learning City.

In total, the large majority of participants expressed surprise by this initiative and evaluated it positively. When they were asked to express their opinion about other events or activities, participants made some very interesting proposals, such as the organization of an ‘Adult Education Week’ in city of Larissa, the establishment of a network between institutions based on overall needs of the local community and also the repetition of similar events with the participation of key persons of Adult Education, re-assuring thus, the continuity of the project.

*The workshop – some ideas*

Following steps of this project included the organization of a 2-day workshop titled ‘Networking and Developing Social Skills’, designed and implemented by Hellenic Adult Education Association. The main aim of this workshop was to gather representatives of all organizations dealing with educational issues and activities in the broader region of the City of Larissa and to create an environment for open dialogue and presentation of best practices, in which further opportunities for networking would be developed. Dialogue itself was considered as an essential tool in the methodology and educational approach of the workshop. Among the participating organizations were representatives from the educational department of the Therapy Center for Dependent Individuals (KETHEA), Second Chance Schools (SDE), Center for Vocational Training, Union of Philologists, Union of Foreign Languages Centers, the educational department of the Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen & Merchants (GSEVEE), from NGOs and various organizations of the public, private and third sector, all of which dealing with education and training issues.

Suspiciousness among participants was obvious from the beginning of this initiative, as this was probably the first time competitors were sitting on the same table discussing on the possibility of creating a common vision and cooperate in specific actions. The idea of the project itself was not taken a priori as a pre-decided and finalized project, but was given as a group task discussion, so as to help everyone express their views and concerns. After a thorough but fruitful discussion, representatives found themselves in a position to share views and opinions and recognize certain benefits of the project. The main findings of this session are presented in table 2.

*Table 2: Aspects discussed from Representatives during an open dialogue session*

| <b>Benefits</b>  | <b>Concerns</b>  |
|--|--|
| Free / open access to education for all                | Manpower shortage  |
| Education diffusion in the society                     | Lack of finances   |
| Promoting Research                                     | Absence of a strategy designed at central level          |
| Activation towards Learning                            | Poor organization / bureaucracy                          |
| Empowerment  | Interconnection with local society                       |
| Volunteer programs development                         | Political instability                                    |
| Communication with youth                               | Absence of Educational Vision                            |
| Cooperation  | Individualism against Collectivism                       |
| Innovation   | Suspiciousness   |
| Employment opportunities                               | Lack of time   |
| Participation in local society                         | Need for recognizing Adult Education as a Culture Factor |
| Transparency / removing injustices regarding education | Labor substitution by voluntary actions                  |
| Claim rights (for educational purposes)                | Just an experiment?                                      |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Setting the basis for a discussion regarding Adult Education Policy in Greece |  |
|---|--|

The second day of the workshop was devoted on the discussion among the representatives and the possibility to create and work on common projects. Participants worked on project ideas and agreed to create common action plans during their next year’s agenda preparation. In total, 12 project titles were proposed, in each of which 4-5 at least organizations were taking part declaring via their representatives their will to participate and collaborate with each other. An indicative list of these project ideas includes the following:

- Providing free lessons for disadvantaged pupils
- Opening School to Society
- Creation of an Information & Consulting Network for unemployed people
- Creation of a web platform for educators

The success of this initiative was evident in the final assessment of the workshop. The positive mood of everyone was obvious, something that was also obvious when participants were asked to evaluate the level at which their attitudes had changed in a positive way during the workshop and the result was an almost 95% who stated ‘high’ or ‘very high’ in a 5-level scale.

*New projects / initiatives*

Other initiatives of City of Larissa during this period were focusing on dealing with special social and financial problems of vulnerable social groups. This approach includes projects such a) as the distribution of food and relief items to more than 4.500 households in the region, a project that required close cooperation between public sector, NGOs and citizens in recording the needs, training volunteers and manpower and commitment in a common goal, b) the ‘Learn, my grandfather, Facebook!’ initiative which aimed to deal with computer literacy of elder people and c) the ‘Local Government and Disabled People’ project in cooperation with many organizations of the City, aiming at solutions for transportation, education and creative activities of disabled people.

Future challenges City of Larissa to retain its dynamic in a difficult environment. However, the strategic plan of 2016 includes actions that promise continuity: Firstly, it seems necessary that all participating bodies form a committee under the auspices of the City Council, in order to coordinate the projects ideas. Moreover, City of Larissa has started already to invest in extraversion, by presenting its best practices in conferences and fora and pursuing twinning with cities with similar concepts.

The above discussion reveals that the experiment of Larissa, as a Learning City, is still in progress. In other words, although there is evidence of a collective transformation learning process, we are not in a position to insist that the cycle is over. At this point, we would like to refer again to Mezirow’s cornerstone, his 10-phase model and try to find out where exactly the project of Larissa is right now (see table 3).

Table 3: Larissa City within Mezirow’s Transformative Learning model

| Phase   | Situation                        | Larissa as Learning City                     |
|---------|----------------------------------|--|
| Phase 1 | A disorienting dilemma           | - New City Council takes over (January 2015) |
| Phase 2 | A self-examination with feelings |  |

|          |   |   |
|----------|---|---|
|          | of guilt or shame   |   |
| Phase 3  | A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions   | - Discussion with people from the Hellenic Adult Education Association / Memorandum of Cooperation (February 2015)  |
| Phase 4  | Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change | - Contacts with other bodies in the broader region of Larissa (February –May 2015)<br>- Organization and hosting of an international Conference on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning (May 2015)   |
| Phase 5  | Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions  | - Participation at the 2nd International Conference on Learning Cities in Mexico (September 2015)<br>- Workshop 'Networking and Developing Social Skills' (October 2015)<br>- Other initiatives (September 2015 – now)<br>- Probably the point the whole project is right now |
| Phase 6  | Planning of a course of action  |   |
| Phase 7  | Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans  |   |
| Phase 8  | Provisional trying of new roles   |   |
| Phase 9  | Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships   | - Future challenges   |
| Phase 10 | A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective  |   |

In any case, the experiment of Larissa seems to be on the right direction. As Fleming states,

‘It is clear that in Larissa things are different. The City Council and the participating educational institutions have together taken on a view of education that is expressed in a language infused with democratic imperatives. All the officials and elected representatives give priority to citizens, encouraging citizens, learning citizens, engaged citizens. This is important as the language captures the values of the city and its learning projects. ... The city allows kinds of learning to take place that may not be possible in other contexts and opens the possibility that together the citizens and the institutions may make the place a better environment in which to live, rear children, and work and enjoy living’ (2015: 4-5).

### Discussion

The experience from the adoption of such perspective seems positive. Unfortunately it is not granted. It never was. The creation of the cooperation network, mentioned in the case of Larissa, which deals with failures of the past and proposes a new educational culture is just a reminder towards this direction. On the other hand, it should not cause any special impression to anyone. A Learning City in Europe, within the crisis context, can only have references to the enlightened and progressive traditions of Adult Education of the 19th and early 20th century, during which popular movements contributed to a social change. In the 21st century, during a period of crisis, a Learning City has the potential to support individuals and groups at risk, to help citizens to critically understand the political context, the real learning needs (Steele, 2006). This Learning City has to bring to the fore all those democratic traditions that may offer a way out of the current economic crisis. With a concept that transcends the sterile need to train people in order to develop skills that will be used for market needs, but rather for a social function, which is important for citizenship, human relations and personal development.

The truth is that defining ‘social function’ with a satisfactory way is a quite difficult task, at least at European level. Within a local community framework, social services are addressed to individuals or groups and may vary from those facing health or mental health problems to people who are in a particularly vulnerable situation, such as the unemployed. The common characteristic of all is social exclusion. Education, as a social service, may play an important role and become the link between these people and the society in total. Their active participation in an open dialogue on issues that are of their interest is the very first step, which could be part of a more holistic strategy, a strategy based on inclusion and collaboration.

The vital question is whether a Learning City could launch and continue such a dialogue, a dialogue that would create the potential of a support system for vulnerable social groups on the basis of lifelong learning, common objectives development, communication and collaborative actions. Future requires organized local communities more responsible in social policy issues. The way is long and passes through decentralization, not necessarily limited in administrative systems. Decentralization is a deeply philosophical, political and cultural sense. It means to create areas of responsibility through partnerships rather than power fields, with people conscious of their responsibility, with new modes and transformational processes.

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