

WORKING GROUP: Older peoples' learning following conflict situations

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In this working group there were representatives of four EU countries present: Portugal Italy, Hungary and Slovenia. Maria Helena Antunes from AidLearn, Portugal was moderating the group.

Our implicit aims were to entail a discussion on:

- (1) the nature of massive social conflict situations and their impact on the participants' transformation;
- (2) the process of learning;
- (3) the impact of learning in social conflict situations, i.e. the impact of this kind of learning has been having on the participants through life and in their old age.

The discussion was not over structured and the above mentioned aims were identified only after the discussion.

We were mostly having in mind learning in conflict situations that occur through one's life- and not necessarily in later life- but we were somehow interested in *the impact such learning may still have in old age*. Since nearly all members of the working group were older and belonged to the category the French would call "people who have lived", this seemed to be a rather sensible choice.

The nature of the massive conflict situations and events

Learning in *massive conflict situations* is mostly of *transformative nature* starting with a disorienting dilemma, causing all sorts of emotions like fear, guilt, shame, the old structures of meaning rather getting replaced by the negotiated new ones (Mezirow, 1991). The nature of massive social conflicts is such that the transformation is experienced at the same time by many people (whole cohorts and generations) who within social conflict situations get involved in transformative

learning. Through their involvement many negotiate *new structures of meaning, replacing the old ones.*

The conflict situation is massive in nature and the change occurred through learning is massive in nature too.

The process of transformative learning

Transformative learning and the process of transformative learning were experienced by the members of the working group in *the revolution against the dictatorship in Portugal, revolution against the communist regime and the Soviet Union in 1956 in Hungary, during the separation of Slovenia from Yugoslavia etc.*

Some of the group members learned *through performing*. For instance Portuguese students got involved in teaching low educated citizens which later somehow paved their career together with, of course, other influential factors and events.

The Slovenian members of the group experienced a change in their understanding emotions, their own emotions towards close friends and emotions they showed towards them. Usually reserved and tolerant, they could demonstrate overt hate during massive conflict situations.

They learnt that in extreme situations human behaviour was mostly influenced by the socially generally accepted norms and that there was not a lot of room for individualised reactions in massive conflict situations.

The impact of learning

According to any, especially older, psychological textbook *learning is mostly a change in behaviour*. In this case learning is approached as a process and as an outcome i.e. the end product of a process. A changed behaviour can be recognized and seen. The participants in the working group admitted that following their involvement in social conflicts they changed emotionally and cognitively.

Thus the crucial aspect of learning in conflict situations is change which often impacts all life and can be felt in old age.

According to Merriam and Caffarella 1991, p. 124 we were also asking ourselves *whether it was necessary for us to perform in order for learning to happen*. The Slovenian members of the group were not actively participating in the ten-day war during the separation of Slovenia from Yugoslavia but still they recognized to have changed. *They somehow tested their emotional functioning, they revised their attitudes, they acquired new knowledge and according to Mezirow (1990) they rebuilt their structures of meaning.*

Members of the group implicitly asked themselves *if there were other factors that caused their behavior to change*. The conclusion was that *active involvement, performing was not necessary for inducing a change. Passive observation can induce a change as well as strong emotions caused*. This was the case of Hungary and Hungarian revolution. The participants in this event learnt that they could get rebellious but the cost for it had to be paid by strong emotions like fear, the experiences of persisting social unfairness and political pressure.

The question we were most interested in was *if the change involved in conflict situation learning could include the potential for change?* Some looked to identify relatively permanent changes in behavior (or potential for change) as a result of massive conflict situation experiences.

However, as we know, *not all changes in behaviour resulting from experience involve learning*. Members of the group could not, not all of them, identify *overt behaviour change* but were rather concerned with how involvement in massive conflict events *changed their understanding, experience, conceptualizing themselves and the world around them*.

Conclusion

Involvement in massive conflict situations is in an active or passive way, triggers transformative learning inducing change: a change in the way we understand ourselves and the world, in the way how we conceptualize the world and how we act through life. The age when we are involved in massive conflict situations is not of an

overwhelming importance since a change as a result of transformative learning can occur at any time in life. What is important, however, is that the change may be felt through life and in later life, of course. Involvement in massive conflict situation can induce change or a potential for change that can be experienced or felt in old age. Massive conflict situations enable changing attitudes, they enable learning about facts, getting new information and skills, but above all they make possible the participants' learning about relationships and the way people function emotionally in extreme situations.

References:

Merriam, S. and Caffarella (1991, 1998) *Learning in Adulthood. A comprehensive guide*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, Jossey-Bass Inc

Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin. Classic account of Freire's position.