



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

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This paper reflects on the epistemological context for the co-design of a research programme on transformative, transgressive learning emerging at the nexus of climate change, water and food security, energy and social justice. It outlines a sequence of learning actions that we, as a group of collaborating partners in a Transformative Knowledge Network (TKN) undertook to co-design a research programme, firstly *in situ* in various case study contexts, and secondly together across case study contexts. Finally, it provides some reflections and learning points.

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A focus on transformative, transgressive learning in times of climate change

The need for radical social learning-centred transformation in times of climate change is recognized in the social-ecological sciences (SES) [1,2,3^{**}]. Yet how this occurs *via* learning processes remains a key under-researched narrative, especially where ‘wicked problems’ arise at the nexus of food-water-energy-climate-social justice

[3^{**},4,5^{**},6^{**},7]. Nexus issues involve interlinked and intersectional concerns that often involve complexity and trade offs [8]. Engaging with such concerns requires learning, dialogue, collaboration and coordination [8,3^{**}], crossing institutional and social boundaries, expanding horizons, transgressing stubborn routines, norms and hegemonic powers [9^{*}]. Ultimately new forms of human activity and new social systems need to be created that are more sustainable and socially just. Latour [10] calls this an open-ended ‘learning curve’ involving multiple relations and perspectives (both human and non-human).

Research undertaken by transition theorists suggests that transformation to sustainability occurs in ‘niches’ at the local level, where nexus concerns arise. It is from this level that wider social changes and regime shift transformations are driven or emerge [11,12]. Radical innovations in niches involve, ‘dedicated actors [who] nurture alignment and development on multiple dimensions to create “configurations that work”’ [11, p. 495]. This involves negotiation and *learning with others* how to bring about such transformations [11,12,13,14,15,16^{**}]. While this is recognized, there is still a lack of clarity on *the types and processes of learning* that drive such ‘radical innovations’ at niche level. There is thus a need for explaining *this type of learning, how such learning occurs, and what influences this learning*.

Confirming the significance of engaging with transformative learning and praxis at the niche level, the IPCC [2] notes that local institutions are important for social engagement in climate change responses and dialogical, participatory and deliberative democracy approaches [17,18,19,20] are seen as helpful in bringing diverse groups of people and institutions together to realize transformative sustainability practices. While there is recognition of the importance of participatory and deliberative approaches for learning and societal change [11,12,13,14,15,16^{**}], the IPCC [2] suggests that the outcomes of such processes are ‘mixed’ and require further research.

There also appears to be poor differentiation between transformative and transgressive forms of learning and a lack of insight into the potential significance of this differentiation for sustainability transitions. Here

we understand transformative learning to involve psychosocial processes of cognitive [21] and emotional, and potentially also social change [22] which may or may not be normatively transformative. Transgressive learning is *a form of* transformative learning that intentionally generates critical thinking and collective agency and praxis that directly and explicitly challenges those aspect of society that have become normalized, but which require challenging for substantive sustainability transformations to emerge (*e.g.* colonial practice or epistemology, gender and race relations, social exclusion, didactical contracts, environmental injustice) [23,24**]. It focuses specifically on structures of privilege, hegemonies of power, and innovative strategies to arrest systemic dysfunction or systemic violence, and it foregrounds cognitive, epistemic, social and environmental justice [23,24**,9*]. Descriptors of transgressive learning such as critical, empathetic, connective, dialogical, radical, and explicitly normative [17,23,24**,25] are potentially interesting for sustainability transitions and transformations, but these are under-explored in the sustainability and learning literature and there is little cross cultural engagement on these concepts in the sustainability literature.

Co-designing research *via* expansive learning actions

Being a diverse group of actors from academia, civil society, policy institutions and social movement networks all interested in the potential value of researching transformative, transgressive learning at the climate-food-energy-water-social justice nexus in the diversity of contexts that we inhabit, we drew inspiration from boundary crossing and expansive learning to guide our research design process [26,27,28]. We worked through a series of intersecting ‘learning actions’ [29**] that helped to structure our group dialogues. The first and most important learning action was to develop an understanding of our diverse contexts and the diversity of nexus issues we were dealing with *in situ*.

Learning Action 1: Case identification, contextual profiling and sharing narratives of social learning

A foundational learning action in our research co-design process consisted of using a methodology developed in southern African environmental education called ‘contextual profiling’ [30]. Research partners in our TKN (from academia, civil society institutions, social movements and public institutions) engaged with local partners confronted with various concerns at the climate-food-water-energy nexus. They explored questions and concerns raised by local participants *in situ* and reflected on existing social learning, and how this could be expanded or extended. We hosted workshops where research partners shared local narratives of social learning at the climate-food-water-energy nexus, and produced reflective papers [31,32**,33,34**,35**,36] and

presentations on these experiences. Table 1 summarizes just three of these local narratives for illustrative purposes.

Cases covered a range of potentially transformative learning contexts including social movements, existing and emergent learning networks, and practice oriented programmes and projects in Ethiopia [34**], South Africa [31,33], Zimbabwe [35**], Sweden, Malawi, the Netherlands, Colombia [32**,54], Vietnam and India. We sought to focus in on *critical cases*, selected for strategic importance to critical sustainability nexus concerns, ability to shed light on a phenomenon, and diversity of context and focus within a multi-levelled system perspective [37].

Learning Action 2: Reflection on existing social learning in nexus issue context

To provide a way of reflecting on the contextually defined nexus concerns, a reflective tool was developed to guide a deepening of engagement with the *in situ* cases (Table 2). Table 2 shows how this tool was applied in the Ethiopian case context by one of our research partners (Belay Ali), a leading civil society activist.

One of the key points of discussion emerging from the use of this reflective tool, was if and how the learning processes observed were transformative and/or transgressive, and why it might be interesting to consider this more carefully in the context of transformations to sustainability. This surfaced both the importance and the complexity of the research object.

Learning Action 3: Deliberating the conceptual foundations of the research programme

Observing the social learning processes in a social context is one thing (as can be seen in Tables 1 and 2). Understanding these processes in relation to transformations to sustainability is another. As outlined above, transgression is a strong concept, and signals critical, reflexive engagement and the transgressing of existing boundaries, norms and/or limitations. Participants in our TKN were interested in the concept of transgression. For example, one participant (McGarry, pers comm.) indicated that the idea of ‘transgressive’ has been helpful in thinking about the learning gaps that exist between empathy and actual politics in environmental justice contexts. Another (Belay Ali, pers comm. see Table 2) suggested that transgression is important, but difficult to achieve due to pervasive macro-level power relations, whilst one researcher (Kulundu [36]) suggested that transgressive learning should be identified with the notion of ‘Not yet Uhuru [freedom]!’ as there are many deeply hidden freedoms that are still to be born in sustainability transitions.

We also needed to understand processes of collective learning at a more foundational level from a transformative, transgressive perspective. Here we found local

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