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The Power of Transgressive Learning Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

Arjen Wals

If education is to make a significant contribution to the transition towards a more sustainable world, it will need to build the kind of capacity in and through education and research that can break the resilient practices of “business-as-usual” that normalize growth thinking, individualism, inequality, anthropocentrism, exclusion, exploitation, and even catastrophes. There are so many catastrophes going on everywhere that—unless, of course, you are in the middle of one, as many are—they can lead to a kind of acceptance of inevitability and a kind of psyching numbing which is not going to help dealing with them.¹

Before making my main point, let me first acknowledge and support the avalanche of propositions that currently take root in education across the globe that all seem to call for all or a combination of the following: “integrative and holistic approaches,” “fundamental and systemic change,” “empowering, action-oriented and reflexive forms of learning,” “boundary crossing between the worlds of education, research, governance, business and civic society,” and “deep engagement” with sustainability-related “wicked problems” around, climate, health, justice, equity, biodiversity, etc., many of which are captured by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Many of these propositions have been made and elaborated upon in this dialogue.

Much attention in education is given to responsiveness, resilience, and adaptation. This attention is, at least in part, fueled by a neoliberal agenda and a globalizing economy, sometimes masked under the umbrella of “21st Century Skills” or even the SDGs. As an example of the latter, SDG 1 states, “No poverty” and not “Eradicate extreme wealth inequality,” while SDG 8 is about “Decent work for all and economic growth” and not about “Decent work for all and a regenerative or circular economy.” This attention leads to an “optimization frame” that leaves the underlying values, principles, and

mechanisms that result in ongoing systemic global dysfunction untouched and, worse, strengthens them. Mainstream education stresses “qualification” (skills and competencies) over “subjectification” (which has to do with existential questions of what it means to be human and about being and becoming in an entangled world).² At the same time and in the same vein, it stresses commodification over what might be called “commonification.” Whereas the former is about creating economic value, accountability, and efficiency, the latter is about creating community, serving the public good, and preserving the integrity and well-being of the non-human and more-than-human world.

Given the urgency of the planetary crisis in which humanity finds itself—not caused by all humans, I must add—we need a radical response, one that requires a “transition frame” seeking to break the maladaptive destructive structures and routines, and associated values and principles. This dismantling is necessary for opening up spaces for alternatives that are healthier, more just and equitable, and, indeed, more sustainable. Doing so requires more than cultivating often-mentioned sustainability competencies and qualities such as dealing with complexity and ambiguity, anticipating and imagining alternative futures, taking mindful action, having empathy and agency, and so on. Rather, it also requires the capacity to disrupt, to make the normal problematic and the ordinary less ordinary, to provoke and question, to take risks for the common good, to complicate matters rather than to simplify them, to become uncomfortable—together—by asking moral questions and posing ethical dilemmas, and to learn from the pushback and the resistances from the normalized unsustainable systems all the above creates.

Transgressive learning, disruptive capacity building, and pedagogies of resistance can be characterized by learning processes and contexts/environments for learning that invite a counter-hegemonic response that seeks to unearth and uproot mechanisms of exploitation, oppression, extractivism, colonialization, and marginalization.³ Yes, transgression, disruption, and resistance will lead to tensions, conflicts, and controversy, but it is therein where critical consciousness and spaces for fundamental change can arise.⁴ When this disruptive work can be combined with participation in social movements and transition niches that provide concrete utopias and viable alternatives, more hopeful, energizing, and regenerative cultures can unfold.⁵ There are some good examples of such forms of learning, usually outside of universities in loose intentional networks like the Youth Climate Strike movement, Extinction Rebellion, and Fridays for Future, but also in intentional communities seeking to go off-the-grid by creating more localized sustainable energy cooperatives, food systems, and green urban renewal.

Education at different, if not all, levels needs to be actively looking for, contributing to, and building on all these niches, communities, and networks. A key question is, how can education in all forms connect with these initiatives and the wider movement in which they are often nested? How can we learn from them, and how can we contribute to them?

Endnotes

1. Bob Jickling, "Normalizing Catastrophe: An Educational Response," *Environmental Education Research* 19, no. 2 (2013): 161–176.
2. Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (London: Routledge, 2013).
3. Heila Lotz-Sisitka, et al., "Co-Designing Research on Transgressive Learning in Times of Climate Change," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 20 (2016): 50–55.
4. Helena Pedersen, Jonna Håkansson, and Arjen Wals, "Introducing Critical Animal Pedagogies in Higher Education," in *Vetenskaplighet i högre utbildning*, edited by Olof Franck (Stockholm: Studentlitteratur, 2017), 315–334.
5. Daniel Wahl, *Designing Regenerative Cultures* (Axminster, UK: Triarchy Press, 2016).

About the Author



Arjen Wals is Professor of Transformative Learning for Socio-Ecological Sustainability at Wageningen University in The Netherlands and Guest Professor on Whole School Approaches to Sustainability at the Norwegian Life Sciences University. He also holds the UNESCO Chair of Social Learning and Sustainable Development. His teaching and research focus on designing learning processes and learning spaces that enable people to contribute meaningfully sustainability. He holds a PhD in natural resources and the environment from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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