

TOWARDS CRITICAL AND TRANSFORMATIVE GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: MEZIROW'S TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY AND THE CHALLENGE OF DEEP CHANGE

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Citation: Dolan, A M (2026) 'Towards Critical and Transformative Global Citizenship Education: Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory and the Challenge of Deep Change', *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, Volume 43, Autumn, pp. 69-88.

Abstract: This article offers a systematic theoretical integration of global citizenship education (GCE) and transformative learning theory (TLT), examining how their intersection can illuminate and strengthen GCE's transformative potential. GCE has emerged as a prominent educational response to intensifying global challenges including climate change, inequality, forced migration, and geopolitical instability. Yet its emancipatory aspirations remain inconsistently realised in practice. TLT, originating in Jack Mezirow's work and subsequently diversified by extensive scholarship, provides a robust process model for understanding how GCE might foster fundamental shifts in learners' meaning perspectives, rather than merely transmitting information about global issues. Through systematic theoretical integration and critical analysis of the literature, this article addresses three central questions: (1) How does TLT illuminate the processes through which GCE can foster perspective transformation? (2) What theoretical tensions emerge at the intersection of these frameworks? (3) What implications can be drawn for the conceptualisation and enactment of transformative GCE? The analysis acknowledges that TLT encompasses diverse and sometimes divergent approaches beyond Mezirow's original formulation. It also interrogates critiques from critical, decolonial, and poststructuralist perspectives, considering their implications for GCE's transformative aims. The article concludes by proposing a theoretically grounded framework for transformative GCE that addresses persistent tensions between individual and collective transformation, cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, and instrumental and emancipatory orientations.

Key words: Global Citizenship Education; Transformative Learning Theory; Mezirow; Perspective Transformation; Critical Reflection; Decolonial Education; Emancipatory Pedagogy; GCE Framework.

Introduction

The early decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed a convergence of global emergencies including climate breakdown, accelerating species loss, deepening socioeconomic inequality, genocide, armed conflict, mass displacement, and the rise of authoritarian populism, none of which can be adequately tackled by any single country or field of expertise. This interlocking array of crises, often termed a polycrisis (Berners-Lee, 2025; Dolan, 2025), describes a situation in which multiple, mutually reinforcing shocks interact to produce conditions that are exceedingly difficult to navigate or resolve. In turn, this polycrisis has placed growing pressure on education systems to cultivate learners who can respond meaningfully to a world marked by profound interconnectedness and persistent unpredictability (UNESCO, 2015; IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2023). Global citizenship education (GCE) positions itself as a direct response. In its transformative variant, GCE seeks to decentre the global North as the sole knowing subject, surface the unexamined histories behind universalist claims, and shift education from transmissive knowledge delivery toward collective political action (Oxley and Morris, 2013; Andreotti, 2006; Davies, 2006).

Yet these transformative aspirations remain persistently contested. Postcolonial, critical race, and poststructuralist scholars argue that mainstream GCE tends to undermine its own goals (Andreotti, 2011; Bryan, 2011; Pashby et al., 2020). While claiming to dismantle epistemic hierarchies, it often reinstates them. The global North becomes the active knower and the global South a passive topic of concern while universal values are championed without acknowledging their Western roots and transformation is reduced to an individual cognitive event rather than understood as shared political struggle. Studies of GCE in practice consistently reveal a gap between ambition and superficial delivery, a gap rooted not merely in implementation, but in unresolved theoretical assumptions about how deep perspective change actually occurs (Shultz, 2007; Tarozzi and Torres, 2016).

It is at this theoretical juncture that transformative learning theory (TLT) offers significant resources. Originating in the work of Jack Mezirow, TLT provides a process model that GCE currently lacks, a vocabulary of disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and rational discourse for understanding how adults revise the deep meaning perspectives that govern their experience (Mezirow, 1991; 2000). However, TLT is not a monolithic framework but a field of diverse approaches, and its critiques mirror those of GCE itself - rationalist bias, inadequate attention to power and structural constraint, under-theorisation of affect and embodiment, and neglect of the collective and political dimensions of transformation (Brookfield, 2012; Taylor, 2008; Hoggan, 2016). This article provides a comprehensive theoretical examination of the relationship between GCE and TLT, addressing three central questions: (1) How does TLT illuminate the processes through which GCE can foster perspective transformation? (2) What theoretical tensions emerge at the intersection of these frameworks? (3) What implications can be drawn for the conceptualisation and enactment of transformative GCE?

Global citizenship education and the implementation gap

The empirical literature extensively documents the gap between GCE's transformative aspirations and its typical enactment in practice. Shultz (2007), reviewing GCE across multiple national contexts, identified a persistent pattern, even approaches that are nominally critical tend to collapse into transmissive pedagogies. Learners receive information about global issues, but they lack structured opportunities for critical reflection and dialogic engagement. Tarozzi and Torres (2016) found similar dynamics across European and North American GCE programmes, noting that teacher discomfort with controversy, institutional time pressures, and assessment cultures oriented toward knowledge recall systematically constrain the space for genuinely transformative pedagogical encounters.

Crucially, this implementation gap is not merely a failure of will or professional skill. More fundamentally, it reflects the absence of a theoretically adequate account of the learning processes through which GCE's transformative aspirations might be realised. Without a coherent framework for understanding

what perspective transformation involves, how it is initiated, and what facilitates or obstructs it, GCE practitioners lack the pedagogical tools to design learning experiences commensurate with the aspirations they nominally pursue. This article argues that TLT provides a significant part of this missing theoretical architecture. Imperfect and contested though it is, TLT, particularly in its broader, post-Mezirow elaborations offers a more systematically developed account of perspective transformation than anything currently available within the GCE literature itself.

Transformative learning theory: architecture, development and elaboration

Mezirow's Foundational Framework

Jack Mezirow developed his transformative learning theory following his 1978 study of women returning to community college after years at home. Across four decades of research, Mezirow identified a form of learning distinct from the mere acquisition of facts or skills, learning as a deep change in the fundamental lenses through which we see the world and decide how to act. He termed these lenses meaning perspectives: 'the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions' (Mezirow, 1994: 222). Meaning perspectives are comprehensive systems that shape how we make sense of all experience. Mezirow (1991) identified three intersecting dimensions of meaning perspectives. The epistemic dimension concerns knowledge itself: what counts as valid knowledge, what constitutes good evidence, and the relationship between knower and known. The sociolinguistic dimension encompasses culture, language, and society, assumptions about social roles, belonging and exclusion, authority, and the meaning of cultural symbols. The psychological dimension pertains to the self: assumptions about our abilities, weaknesses, relational tendencies, and emotional responses to threat or novelty. In practice, these dimensions are deeply entangled. A false belief about one's abilities may be sustained by cultural norms regarding gender or class and reinforced by an epistemology that dismisses certain ways of knowing as invalid.

For Mezirow (1991, 2000), perspective transformation is the process by which individuals critically examine and revise the deep assumptions or the meaning perspectives, that have structured their interpretation of experience. This

is not mere information acquisition or incremental adjustment within an existing framework. Rather, it involves a fundamental shift in the very structures through which we understand ourselves, our relationships, and the world. Triggered by a disorienting dilemma, the process demands critical examination of long-held assumptions. The outcome is a more inclusive, discriminating, and open perspective that enables new ways of being and acting. Perspective transformation is deeply personal, often uncomfortable, and fundamentally alters one's identity and sense of purpose (Mezirow, 1991).

De Oliveira (2021) extends Mezirow's work by insisting that transformation must be collective, painful, and world-ending, not merely individual and assumption-revising. While Mezirow focuses on personal cognitive shifts, De Oliveira, (2021: xxi) argues that our entire modern/colonial frame of reference the 'single story of progress' must be hospiced, not merely revised. This demands disinvestment from promises of mastery, growth, and innocence. For De Oliveira, perspective transformation becomes a form of intellectual accountability, the capacity to sit with complicity, complexity and grief without seeking resolution or recognition. It is not about becoming a better person, but about unmaking the self that clings to harmful conscious and unconscious practices. Transformation is ongoing, humble, and relational, a collective practice of letting go. This reframes global citizenship not as a status to achieve, but as a lifelong, uncomfortable practice of collective responsibility and ethical wakefulness.

Disorienting dilemmas and the phases of transformation

Mezirow proposed that transformative learning characteristically begins with a disorienting dilemma, an experience whose meaning cannot be adequately assimilated within the learner's existing meaning perspective, generating sufficient cognitive and affective disturbance to motivate re-examination of foundational assumptions (Mezirow: 1991, 2000). Disorienting dilemmas may be acute, such as bereavement, diagnosis, migration, or encounter with radical injustice, or may result from the gradual accumulation of conflicting experiences that eventually reach a threshold of dissonance. From this initiating moment, Mezirow (1991: 168-169) elaborated a ten-phase sequence of transformative learning: a disorienting dilemma; self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame; critical

assessment of assumptions; recognition that one's discontent and transformation are shared; exploration of new roles and actions; planning a course of action; acquiring knowledge and skills; provisional trying of new roles; building competence and self-confidence; and reintegration on the basis of one's new perspective. This sequence has been criticised as excessively linear and cognitively rationalist (Taylor, 2008; Hoggan, 2016), but it remains the most systematic developmental account of perspective transformation available.

Beyond Mezirow: the development of divergent traditions

Mezirow's framework has been substantially elaborated, contested, and extended by subsequent scholarship. Taylor's (2008) comprehensive review confirmed the importance of disorienting dilemmas and critical reflection while challenging the linearity of Mezirow's original sequence and documenting significant variation in how transformation actually unfolds. Crucially, Taylor demonstrated that transformative learning has expanded beyond Mezirow's formulation to encompass affective, relational, and even spiritual dimensions of change. Hoggan (2016) argued that transformation can occur across four domains: epistemology (how we know), ontology (who we are), behaviour (what we do), and structural capacity (our ability to navigate systems). He suggested that Mezirow's theory overemphasises epistemological change while neglecting the other three domains. For GCE, which aims for both cognitive and identity-level change, this distinction is crucial.

Dirkx (2006, 2012) argued that Mezirow's theory is overly reliant on rational, logical thinking. Drawing on depth psychology, Dirkx suggested that genuine transformation also involves emotions, imagination, and unconscious forces, deeply personal, often non-rational elements for which Mezirow's framework has no adequate account. De Oliveira (2021) pushes this critique further, reframing transformative learning as a process of unlearning and self-unmaking, a radical departure from conventional education's emphasis on acquisition and mastery. Unlearning is the painful, active process of disinvesting from the deeply embedded assumptions, desires, and worldviews that modernity has instilled in us: letting go of the 'single story of progress' (De Oliveira, 2021: xxi), the belief in endless growth, and the promise of the good life defined by accumulation.

Yet unlearning alone is insufficient. It must be accompanied by self-unmaking, the dismantling of the very identity constructed around modern values. This means surrendering the heroic narrative of the saviour, the activist, or the 'good person' on the right side of history. De Oliveira uses the metaphor of the onion. Unlike a cup, which is filled with knowledge, the onion has no fixed centre. Self-unmaking involves peeling away layers, certainties, defences, attachments, until no solid core remains. This involves grief for the person one thought oneself to be and the world one thought one inhabited. Yet, in this unmaking, there is also a strange liberation, the relief of shedding a skin that no longer fits. This is what De Oliveira means by hospicing, offering palliative care to a dying world while making space for something new to be born. Ultimately, unlearning and self-unmaking are about developing the capacity to dwell in discomfort, to sit with complexity and complicity without rushing to resolution. It is the most difficult learning there is and, De Oliveira suggests, the only learning that can save us. Crucially, De Oliveira insists that this is a collective practice.

We cannot do this alone, because the perspectives we need to unmake are collectively held and reinforced. Solnit (2026) expands this idea by calling for a shift towards seeing the world as an intricate web of connection, where the isolated self is a myth, and where collaboration, not competition, is the engine of life and society. Taken together, these developments have made transformative learning theory considerably richer and more diverse than Mezirow's early work alone. This expanded tradition is now better equipped to address the full range of dimensions that GCE aspires to engage, not just thinking and reasoning, but also emotions, relationships, spirituality, and political action. However, this diversity also raises important questions about whether a unified 'transformative learning theory' still exists, or whether we should instead speak of transformative learning theories in the plural. This article argues that while no single framework can address all of GCE's concerns, the broader tradition of transformative learning scholarship offers valuable resources when approached critically and selectively

Productive convergences: TLT as theoretical architecture for transformative GCE

Meaning perspectives, disorienting dilemmas and the formation of global understanding

The most fundamental connection between TLT and GCE concerns the role of pre-existing meaning perspectives in shaping and distorting learners' understanding of global realities. Learners do not approach global issues as blank slates. They bring deeply held perspectives shaped by nationality, culture, media, religion, and economic position, assumptions about Western superiority, the fairness of the global economy, the deservingness of the global poor, or the extent of individual responsibility for distant others. This is GCE's real challenge, not filling gaps in knowledge, but engaging with the perspectives learners already hold. TLT explains why simply presenting facts about global problems so often fails to change attitudes or behaviour. If learners' existing perspectives are not directly addressed, new information will be filtered and bent to fit those perspectives, confirming rather than challenging prior beliefs (Mezirow, 1991; King, 2005). This insight pushes GCE away from content delivery and toward the design of experiences that create sufficient discomfort to prompt learners to question their deepest assumptions.

The concept of the disorienting dilemma acquires particular salience in GCE contexts. The encounter with global suffering, injustice, and complexity is frequently disorienting for learners whose meaning perspectives have been formed within the relative insulation of national and cultural privilege. The lived realities of climate displacement, the structural dynamics of global poverty, and non-Western epistemic traditions can, under appropriate pedagogical conditions, function as precisely the kind of disorienting experience that initiates transformative learning. For privileged learners, encountering global suffering is deeply unsettling, and research (Kiely, 2004) demonstrates that this discomfort, when pedagogically supported, is the most powerful trigger for genuine transformation. GCE should therefore prepare for dissonance, not avoid it.

Critical reflection as GCE's core competence

Mezirow's (1991) three-level framework of critical reflection describes a progression from surface-level thinking to the questioning of core beliefs. Content

reflection examines what happened; process reflection examines how we think, feel, or act; and premise reflection questions why we perceive and act as we do. Premise reflection is the deepest level, potentially leading to perspective transformation. This framework maps directly onto GCE's competence aspirations. Content-level analysis of global issues represents the most straightforward dimension, process reflection extends into questions of efficacy and ethics while premise reflection, the critical examination of foundational assumptions represents the most demanding and transformatively significant aspiration.

The pedagogical conditions for cultivating premise reflection are demanding but knowable. Brookfield (2012) offers a practical framework using four lenses: (i) autobiographical reflection on how life experiences shaped global assumptions; (ii) dialogic engagement with others who see the world differently; (iii) encounter with theoretical frameworks that reveal hidden structural conditions; and (iv) immersion in narratives that embody entirely different meaning perspectives. While Mezirow's transformation involves critically reflecting on assumptions to build a better frame of reference, De Oliveira (2021) argues this is insufficient when the core problem is not ignorance but denial. Denial is a fortress built by the ego to protect the self-image we have carefully constructed. It allows us to know about climate catastrophe and ongoing systemic violence and still feel like fundamentally decent people. Transformative learning must bypass the ego's defences and force us to confront our complicity. This is a psychic and spiritual dismantling that feels like dying, because, in a very real sense, a part of us does die.

Rational discourse and the democratic classroom

Mezirow argued that rational discourse requires the absence of coercion, equal participation, and genuine openness to changing one's opinions in the face of better arguments. These conditions align with GCE's aspiration to develop democratic citizens who can engage across difference. A GCE experience grounded in TLT takes these dialogic conditions seriously: diverse perspectives are genuinely heard; status does not determine whose voice matters; and learners are supported to develop dialogic skills such as listening, perspective-taking, and resisting premature certainty. Such conditions are particularly important because

GCE deals with deeply controversial, value-laden topics that provoke defensiveness. A pedagogy informed by TLT embraces controversy rather than avoids it, requiring clear norms for respectful inquiry, intellectual tools for evidence-based discussion, and epistemic dispositions such as humility and responsiveness to evidence (Hess, 2009; Parker, 2003). However, not all learners come to these discussions with genuine openness to change. Some may feel personally threatened by discussions that implicate them in privilege or injustice. TLT suggests that the conditions for openness such as safety, trust, and being genuinely heard, must be carefully cultivated through deliberate pedagogical planning.

Theoretical tensions and critical interrogations

The rationalist bias: affect, embodiment and the limits of cognition

The most persistent criticism of Mezirow's TLT is its overemphasis on rational thinking. Heavily influenced by Habermas (1984), Mezirow framed transformation primarily as revising beliefs through logical discourse. Critics argue this undervalues the role of emotion, physical sensation, and the body in forming and revising assumptions (Dirkx, 2006, 2012; Illeris, 2014). The issues GCE engages with are emotionally and existentially charged, affecting learners at levels that pure rational dialogue cannot reach. Zembylas' (2012) work on anti-racism pedagogy demonstrates how emotions like shame, guilt, anger, and grief can either enable or block reflective engagement. Later scholars who built on and critiqued Mezirow offer resources to address this gap (Dirkx, 2006; Brookfield, 2012; Hoggan, 2016; De Oliveira, 2021), enriching his framework to better suit the full scope of GCE.

Power, privilege, and the politics of transformation

Brookfield (2012) offers a critique from critical theory, arguing that Mezirow's framework is insufficiently attentive to structural conditions including class, race, gender, that shape both how we develop distorted worldviews and whether we have opportunity to transform them. Mezirow's idealisation of rational discourse as universally available risks allowing privileged groups' communication norms to pass as universal standards. This aligns with postcolonial scholarship on GCE. Andreotti (2011: 4-6) analysed the 'epistemic violence' unreflective GCE can

commit. The global North positions itself as the knowing subject while treating the global South as objects to be fixed, a transformation that reinforces rather than challenges privilege. Spivak's (1988: 86) concept of 'sanctioned ignorance' captures the structural inability of Western liberal education to truly hear the voice of the subaltern. Transformation that occurs entirely within existing frameworks may leave the deepest distortions untouched. Perspective transformation must include transforming how learners understand their own position within global systems, their privilege, complicity, and situatedness as knowers, requiring what Leonardo (2009: 107) calls 'white ignorance' work and De Oliveira's (2021) 'hospicing modernity'. Bryan's (2022: 329) 'pedagogy of the implicated' positions learners as already enmeshed in relations of privilege and complicity, making structural critique immediately accessible.

Individual and collective dimensions of transformation

Mezirow's framework is fundamentally about individual learning. While he acknowledges that transformed individuals might engage in collective action, he does not theorise these dimensions as integral to transformation itself. For GCE, which aspires to both individual change and collective action, this is a significant limitation. Freire's (1993) concept of conscientisation offers a richer account of collective transformation, though it addresses the oppressed rather than the privileged learner who is typically the focus of GCE. Welton (1995) developed a social movement learning framework, arguing that social movements are learning sites where people develop critical awareness, share knowledge, and build collective identity. These scholars offer partial bridges, but the challenge remains unresolved: how do we integrate individual and collective transformation? While no single framework adequately addresses both, practitioners can draw on both Mezirow's account of individual transformation and Welton's account of collective learning, recognising that different contexts require different emphases. For Solnit (2026) the phrase 'the beginning comes after the end' (taken from the title of her book) is a powerful way to reframe how we think about social and political change, and collective action is central to this process. For Solnit, the 'end' is not a final catastrophe, but the visible collapse of an old, dominant worldview. The 'beginning' is the new world that is already being built through the patient, often unseen, work of many people acting together. Solnit argues that major change rarely happens through a single, dramatic event. Instead, it's the

result of a slow revolution driven by countless small, persistent actions that build up over time. This is where collective action is crucial.

Decolonial and poststructuralist interrogations

Poststructuralist and decolonial thinkers raise deeper problems that attack the shared foundations of both TLT and GCE. The global citizen is a particular kind of person shaped by particular political interests (Foucault, 1972; Butler, 1990). Both TLT and GCE are products of Western colonialism's long history. Mignolo (2007: 156) describes the 'colonial matrix of power', the deep structures through which the West dominated other ways of knowing and being. Without decolonising the very notion of transformation, a particular Western version of the human becomes the universal standard (Wynter, 2003). These critiques suggest we need to rebuild TLT and GCE entirely, not merely revise them. This article argues that taking these critiques seriously produces a more honest and responsible form of transformative GCE. Recent scholarship, including the special issue of Prospects (2025, Issue 55), collated by Bosio and Waghid (2025) provides important resources for rethinking both theory and practice.

Towards a framework for critically transformative GCE praxis

Based on the preceding analysis, this section proposes a six-point framework of commitments for critically transformative GCE. Informed by Mezirow's theory while responsive to its critiques, each commitment is grounded in the theoretical analysis above.

First commitment: consider epistemic disruption as pedagogical strength

This means deliberately creating encounters with global complexity that challenge and unsettle existing beliefs, building a curriculum that prioritises challenge over comfort, counter-narratives over dominant stories, and structural analysis over individual charity. Responding to Andreotti's (2006, 2011) critique of soft GCE, genuine transformation requires epistemic disruption that unsettles not just what learners know but how they know it. This is not about causing distress for its own sake but about creating conditions for premise reflection. As Kiely's (2004) research demonstrates, it is precisely the discomfort of encountering radically different realities that, when pedagogically supported, triggers genuine transformation. For instance, De Oliveira (2021) draws inspiration from

Indigenous philosophies, which view living and dying well as inseparable, offering a pathway away from the modern Western obsession with the good life defined by accumulation towards a more relational and responsible way of being.

Second commitment: critical reflection must take place at the level of premises

This operationalises Mezirow's (1991) distinction between content/process reflection and premise reflection. Content and process reflection are like rearranging the furniture, the worldview remains intact. Premise reflection means stepping outside the house entirely and inspecting its foundations. For GCE, this means moving beyond asking learners what they think to examining the deeper epistemological frameworks that shape how they think. This demands pedagogical tools and sufficient time for genuine reflective engagement. Brookfield's (2012) four-lens framework provides practical guidance.

Third commitment: power matters: rethinking dialogue and transformation

This draws on Mezirow's ideal of rational discourse while responding to Brookfield's critique of its insufficient attention to power. We should aim for encounters where no one is coerced into agreement, everyone has genuine opportunity to speak, and participants are open to changing their minds. However, we must remain realistic about power dynamics, confidence, social status, cultural authority, factors forever present in economic settings. This means actively creating inclusive and equitable conditions, attending to whose voices are present, and modelling intellectual virtues. It also means acknowledging that some learners may experience discussions as threatening. Transformative pedagogy must anticipate resistance and prepare for it.

Fourth commitment: beyond rationality: emotion and embodiment in critical education

Responding to critiques from Dirkx (2006, 2012), Illeris (2014), and Zembylas (2012), this commitment recognises that transformation is not merely cognitive. When students genuinely confront global realities, they experience emotional reactions: grief for what is being lost; anger at those in power; shame about privilege or complicity; and hope that something else is possible. Many educational settings avoid these feelings. TLT makes space for them, recognising emotions as the raw material of transformation. Drawing on Dirkx's (2006: 116)

‘soul-based’ account, this commitment foregrounds emotion, imagination, and the unconscious. It also recognises, drawing on Zembylas' (2012) work on anti-racism pedagogy, that emotions can both enable and block transformation. The goal is not to induce guilt or shame but to create conditions for working through these emotions productively.

Fifth commitment: unsettling the known: towards a decolonial practice

Responding to critiques from Andreotti (2011), Mignolo (2007), and Wynter (2003), this commitment challenges mainstream GCE's unspoken assumptions about knowledge, rationality, development, and progress, assumptions that are Western but treated as universal. A decolonial orientation makes space for non-Western and marginalised ways of knowing, not as curiosities or objects of pity, but as genuine contributions to a global conversation. This commitment also requires recognising the diversity of learner subject positions within GCE. Transformation for learners in the global South, who may themselves be marginalised by global systems, will look different from transformation for privileged learners in the global North. A decolonial orientation is attentive to these differences, refusing universalised models of transformation that ignore the specific situatedness of different learners. Recent scholarship on decolonial GCE (Bosio and Waghid, 2025) provides resources for operationalising this commitment.

Sixth commitment: attention to the conditions of possibility

This applies TLT to educational institutions themselves. Transformation does not happen simply because an educator wants it to; it occurs within real institutions with their own rules, pressures, and cultures. Most curriculum structures are rigid. Assessment regimes reward memorising facts while institutional cultures value efficiency over messy, non-linear learning. Genuine transformation requires the opposite, time to sit with discomfort, space for uncertainty, and permission to be unsettled. A critically transformative GCE must attend to these structural, institutional, and relational conditions. This commitment draws on Welton's (1995) social movement learning framework, highlighting how collective action and institutional change are necessary for transformation to extend beyond individual learners.

A final note: orientate toward praxis

These six commitments should function as a compass rather than a map. Freire's concept of praxis, the endless back-and-forth between reflection and action is central: reflect, act, observe, reflect again, adjust, act again. These commitments will look different in different contexts. Educators should expect tensions. These are not failures but opportunities to pause and ask what can be learned. Transformation does not emerge from smooth, linear progression but precisely from the friction between aspiration and resistance, between old assumptions and disruptive encounters. When educators and learners learn to stay with discomfort rather than retreat from it, the conditions for genuine perspective change begin to materialise.

Conclusion: the challenge of deep change

This article has argued that transformative learning theory offers GCE a rigorous explanation of how deep learning actually happens. Starting with Mezirow's foundational work and extended by subsequent scholarship, TLT's key ideas including meaning perspectives, disorienting dilemmas, premise reflection, and rational discourse, have much to offer GCE. However, tensions remain, as TLT has been criticised from multiple directions: critical theory, decolonial scholarship, poststructuralist thought, and research on emotion. The framework proposed here does not solve these tensions and that is not a failure. Tensions can be productive. The tension between individual and collective change keeps alive the question of what education is really for. The tension between thinking and feeling prevents us from reducing learning to a purely intellectual or emotional endeavour. The tension between practical goals and deeper hopes enables GCE to critique itself when institutions push it toward the purely instrumental. Importantly, these critiques do not apply uniformly to all versions of TLT. Although Mezirow's original model justifiably attracts criticism for its over-reliance on rationality and its neglect of emotional dimensions, later contributions to the transformative learning literature have worked to correct these imbalances. The framework proposed in this article draws on both Mezirow's foundational insights and these subsequent developments, while acknowledging that no single theoretical tradition can fully resolve the challenges of transformative GCE.

What the framework offers is a set of principles for navigating these tensions, not as a roadmap to certainty, but as a compass for staying honest. These principles help educators hold onto GCE's deepest hopes while acknowledging just how difficult the work truly is. The polycrisis of our time leaves no room for pretence. We cannot claim to be transformative while merely transmitting information. The polycrisis requires nothing less than profound, unsettling change in how learners see themselves, their world, and their responsibilities. Applied with critical rigour and integrity, transformative learning theory is one of the most powerful frameworks we have to achieve it. But let us be clear. The challenge GCE faces is not primarily a technical problem of programme design. Design matters, but that is not the heart of it. This is a philosophical, political, and existential challenge. It strikes at the very foundations of educational systems, their assumptions about what learning is, who it serves, and what it is for. Meeting that challenge requires exactly the kind of premise reflection that Mezirow, at his most rigorous, insisted upon. It demands that we stop rearranging the furniture and start questioning the architecture itself.

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