

# Transformative Research and Higher Education



Edited by  
**Azril Bacal Roij**

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**AZRIL BACAL ROIJ**

*Uppsala University, Sweden*



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# Table of Contents

About the Editor	vii
About the Contributors	ix
Acknowledgements	xiii
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Azril Bacal Roij</i>	
<b>Chapter 1 Active Learning, Participatory Action-Research and Intercultural Dialogue in the 21st Century</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Azril Bacal Roij</i>	
<b>Chapter 2 Critical Pedagogy for Environmental and Social Change: What Helps? What Obstructs? Theory and Practice in Dialogue</b>	<b>45</b>
<i>Christina Marouli</i>	
<b>Chapter 3 Action Research in Planning Education – Lessons from Roskilde University</b>	<b>73</b>
<i>Martin Severin Frandsen and John Andersen</i>	
<b>Chapter 4 PAR: Resistance to Racist Migration Policies in the UK</b>	<b>93</b>
<i>Umut Erel, Erene Kaptani, Maggie O'Neill and Tracey Reynolds</i>	
<b>Chapter 5 The Movement toward Knowledge Democracy in Participatory and Action Research</b>	<b>107</b>
<i>Erik Lindhult</i>	
<b>Chapter 6 Transforming the University to Confront the Climate Crisis</b>	<b>129</b>
<i>John Foran</i>	

<b>Chapter 7 Transformative and Social Learning – In the Tradition of Freire</b>	145
<i>Frans Lenglet</i>	
<b>Chapter 8 Finding Hope in an Absurd University</b>	161
<i>Vicente Manzano-Arrondo</i>	
Index	181

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## About the Contributors

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# Introduction

*Azril Bacal Roij*

## Summary

The aim in this book is to contribute to the contemporary efforts to replace the hegemonic neoliberal university with an alternative collaborative academic system. This alternative approach to university life and knowledge democracy is already under construction. The authors of this anthology join in this respect an emerging global network of concerned scholars, who are currently engaged in dialogue with civil society and social movements. In arguing for the transformation of research and education, this book provides concrete examples of creativity, innovativeness and knowledge democracy in this endeavour. This paradigmatic shift is called for against the backdrop of a generalized global crisis. The authors seek in this context to enhance the agenda, curricula and debate on how a transformed university might help in the construction of another possible post-pandemic world built on premises of justice and peace. This book shares pertinent insights from classical authors like Dorothy Lee, Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda, with up-to-date innovative practices in research and higher education.

## Context

When approaching this academic venture, we are painfully aware that the situation of the world has dramatically changed in the past years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. This global emergency confronts humanity and universities with severe problems, challenges and new possibilities. The features of this crisis come in the guise of environmental and tropical forest devastation, zoonotic diseases, humanitarian refugee catastrophe, growing militarism, neoliberalization of research and education and the return of far-right social movements to the international political arena. These features unveil nonetheless how global inequalities correlate with zoonotic diseases and global warming. While not dwelling in depth with these issues, the authors highlight the pervasive lack of vision and democratic governance in the world system of research and higher education.

This generalized neglect reflects the spell of the neoliberal agenda, associated with ideological premises of market fundamentalism and privatization of the fruits of public research and education via patents and the like. The authors

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contend that after the pandemic is over, there is no going back to the situation of 'business as usual'. The present venture is an attempt made by a small collective of critical scholars to examine and respond to various problematic features of this global crisis, thereby proposing viable changes in the institutional frameworks of research and education. Historically, most of the production and transfer of knowledge take place in elitist and increasingly privatized spaces of research and education. At the same time, transformative research and education are emancipatory tools available in the university world. This anthology weaves together theoretical insights and practical guidelines on how to surpass conventional ways of designing and conducting research and education. These reflections are here with shared with colleagues and students immersed in the realms of research and learning. Thereby the authors seek to include them in the crucial collaborative task of surmounting together the threatening clouds looming on the world horizon.

## **Perspective**

What then is the role of the new paradigm and praxis of research and higher education envisaged by the authors? The vision in this book entails the need to scrutinize the ways in which the organizational design, curricula and institutional operation of schools and universities might be functionally irrelevant at best. The authors propose concrete ways to replace obsolete features previously mentioned. The pedagogical legacy of Paulo Freire is a common thread of inspiration in the chapters in this book. While not completely new for readers familiar with his work, this book appeals to a younger generation of scholars, teachers and students, unaware of his seminal contributions. This book highlights the seminal contributions of Paulo Freire to awareness-raising pedagogics via critical teaching and learning, participatory action-research, cultural dialogue and hope. In this light, the reader is better able to understand the consequences from the educational counter-reforms by military regimes in Latin America (for example, in the mid-sixties in Brazil and 1973 in Chile). This authoritarian wave hit the world at large after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, resulting in the hegemony of the neoliberal doctrine of instructional education.

In the light of the international celebration of Freire's 100th birthday anniversary, Vicente Manzano-Arrondo examines in Chapter 8 of this anthology the dual role of universities. On the one hand, helping to reproduce societal conditions of vertical hierarchy and conformity.

On the other hand, helping the human potential and creativity of researchers, teachers and students presently engaged in the production, diffusion, dialogue and access to useful knowledge by people who need it the most. A common bond shared by the authors is the belief that it is possible and desirable to make timely changes in universities, aligned with the ongoing efforts by civil society to change the world. This viewpoint is arguably one strategic mission of a post-neoliberal university adopted by the authors, who both examine and respond to the reductionist policies and privatization mantra pushed by the neoliberal agenda of

research and the banking approach to education. To counteract the damage, this book presents a wide variety of approaches, definitions and case studies. The prefix transformative points to a paradigmatic shift from the production of knowledge that in the past benefited the privileged few to a new paradigm endorsed in this book. This new paradigm seeks to ensure that the fruits of research and education directly benefit the common good, as proposed by the university reform movements in the past. Given the existing limitations of time and space, this volume does not cover all possible regions and ethno-cultural diversity of the world. It is nonetheless an attempt to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world situation, where the authors raise and seek answers to questions about contemporary research and higher education, in timely and significant ways.

### **Freire as Inspiration**

The common theme that frames and weaves together the various chapters in this book lies in the pedagogical pertinence of Paulo Freire, seeking to link his insights with contemporary research findings. The enclosed chapters provide the reader with concrete examples of viable changes in research and education. Transformative education alludes to personal and organizational changes in teachers, students, curricula, school organization and decision-making process. In this regard, learning is a life-long process, as suggested by UNESCO. It also pays attention to often neglected formative values of students that support their autonomy, critical thinking, awareness and engagement in society as concerned citizens. As proposed by Freire, education is either oppressive and alienating or liberating and emancipatory.

In a similar way, transformative research refers to changing the conventional ways of doing research, by making it more participatory by empowering researched communities and enhancing their role as citizens in society. Culture dialogue entails ways to address and respectfully deal and overcome ethnocentric bias in research and higher education. Participatory action-research is one way to bridge the realms of research and higher education, by making research an integral part of the educational process and education more research-oriented. Looking at the two-faced academic *Janus*, the authors contend that the modus operandi of universities makes them an integral part of the problems in question.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, this book shows that universities are privileged social spaces where social knowledge is available for the common good.<sup>2</sup> This anthology collects and shares the actual experience and reflections from a small network of engaged scholars who dwell in various disciplines and different corners of the Western world. While some chapters are more theoretical in character, the book provides useful examples and practical resources, available for those interested in transforming university research and education to overcome world problems and challenges. The authors argue in this light for the need to change the university as an integral part of social transformation.

## **Study Problems**

The key study problems and issues addressed in this book read as follows: (1) In current education, too much emphasis is placed on learning instruction and student motivational techniques, while critical thinking and formative values receive insufficient attention. (2) The academic division of labour that divorces teaching/learning activities from research. (3) The perils to democracy from cultural intolerance, racism and neo-fascism. (4) The threats to the planet and civilization from environmental and social devastation in the Anthropocene. (5) The many structural and cultural barriers that block the way of social change and university transformation. (6) The severity of climate change turned into a climate emergency. (7) Due to restrictive migratory policies, migrant families confront increasing 'hostile environments' in the rich world. (8) Top-down urban planning and unsustainable city growth are narrowing the options for humane and sustainable spatial conditions. (9) Technocratic and undemocratic tendencies characterize conventional science and modes of enquiry. (10) The complexity of 'Wicked' problems and dilemmas demand innovative and interdisciplinary practices in research and education. (11) The mounting costs and negative consequences for society from the operation of absurd and dysfunctional universities.

Some of the corresponding research questions were, for example, how to align theory, methodology and social practice with ethical, philosophical and democratic values? What changes in research and educational institutions are necessary? What are the resources needed to surmount the challenges and obstacles lying ahead in our path to transform research and teaching/learning? What is the intended audience of readers we want to reach with this publication? A particular contribution of this book lies in the historical, geographical, positional and situated diversity of the authors' backgrounds.

## **Brief Synopsis of the Chapters**

In Chapter 1: 'Active Learning, Participatory Action-Research and Intercultural Dialogue' regarded as three windows to look at transformative research and higher education. Azril Bacal at the Sociology Department, Uppsala University and CIPAE-Puebla, México, introduces significant contributions made by Dorothy Lee, Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda to these study fields, from a perspective of dialogue, hope, autonomy, self-determination, democracy, justice and peace. These value premises provide the theoretical and normative threads weaving together the research and reflections by Bacal on these subjects. The author also borrowed selected insights from Martin Buber, Dag Hammarskjöld and Federico Mayor Zaragoza, concerned with the role of dialogue in building community, democracy, diplomacy and sustainable peace. The aims in this study are to help raise the awareness and behaviour of our fellow colleagues, young scholars and concerned citizens and to help them bridge the realms of theory, research, social knowledge and innovations, to guide our transformative praxis. The illustrations and included vignettes mirror the life-long experience and reflections of the author. In the end, the author contends in this chapter that the

living legacy of the alluded authors defies the passage of time, in an era that prizes absurdity and the latest academic fad.

In Chapter 2 on 'Critical Pedagogy for Environmental and Social Change: How? What Helps? What Obstructs? Theory and Practice in Dialogue', Christina Marouli, currently an Associate Professor in Environmental Studies at Deree American College of Greece, invites the reader to acknowledge the fact that contemporary societies face serious environmental and social challenges that require decisive action.

In 1970, Environmental Education (EE) was first introduced as a method to raise awareness about environmental problems and also to bring about needed changes in social practices that can lead to environmental protection, and more recently sustainable development (transforming EE – to Education for Sustainability (EfS)). In the context of EE and EfS and aiming to change behaviour, a task akin to critical pedagogics intended to encourage and empower citizens to solve the alluded social problems, the author raises the following questions: What pedagogical approaches and educational methods are more effective in bringing about changes in attitudes and social practices? Which are the keys of instructional design and practice that facilitate such transformation? What are the challenges? These questions trouble environmental educators and are worth reflecting on, in the present context of knowledge societies and of higher education significantly impacted by a neoliberal ideology. This chapter contributes to the ongoing discussion on these questions, through dialogue between theory and practice. Framed by critical theory and pedagogics, both EE and EfS unveil many theoretical insights based in the author's more than 30-years teaching experience (primarily in Greece). A discussion of the instructor's key pedagogical influences and the evolution of her instructional practices follows, to identify instructional practices that have a transformative potential, within the context of the challenges and facilitating parameters of contemporary societies and educational contexts. The author's self-reflections as an instructor in addition to the analysis of the students' qualitative comments in course evaluations and other informal evaluative situations enhance a self-study research approach. The author ends this chapter with the parable of Plato's cave, aiming to highlight the key elements of transformative educational praxis such as: The freeing of the body to involve the whole learner (body, mind, spirit) in the learning process; to create supportive and loving learning environments that incite wonder, imagination and hope; to democratize learning environments and thereby help students to connect with their wondering selves and critical consciousness; and to connect educational contexts with the local community and nature, thereby fostering relevant learning and wonder-creating learning settings.

In Chapter 3: 'Transforming the University to Confront the Climate Crisis', John Foran, a university professor of sociology and environmental studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, draws from his teaching about movements for radical social change for many years.

For the last decade, the author has dedicated his attention to questions of how to transform the university to confront the climate crisis. His chapter explores the crisis of higher education with respect to the most pressing existential challenge of

the twenty first century and proposes various approaches, actions, activities and projects for both classroom teachers and networks of educators. There is a long list of innovative experiences in higher education developed by the author, among which stand out the UC-CSU NXTerra Knowledge Action Network, the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) developed a nearly carbon neutral conference, and the students engaged in the design and implementation of systemic alternatives outside the classroom and in their own communities. One such student research and social change project is Eco Vista, with the 23,000-member mixture of students and the more permanent inhabitants of Isla Vista, a neighbourhood adjacent to UCSB, presented as just one example among others. The UC-CSU NXTerra Knowledge Action Network is another example of collaboration of 15 faculties from the University of California and California State University systems that produces teaching resources on the climate crisis, climate justice and critical sustainability for university (and high school) teachers and their students. This happens across all disciplines, thereby establishing a bridge of the humanities with the social and natural sciences. Currently comprising 17 'topics', these scholars invite new topics through a network strategy of connection with fellow teachers who might add to and/or deepen the range and scope of pedagogies with which the climate crisis is addressed. The essay ends with a vision of new type of university, exemplified in the world spanning Ecoversities Alliance and dreamed of in 'Transition U and Eco Vista U', two prototypes of participatory action-research and active higher education currently being co-created by students, staff, faculty and community members in Santa Barbara, California, and in the Transition US movement.

Chapter 4 presents the main features of a study entitled: 'PAR: Resistance to Racist Migration Policies in the UK', by Umut Erel, Erere Kaptani, Maggie O'Neill and Tracey Reynolds, at the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University, United K. The authors share their research findings from the collaborative research project 'PASAR: Participatory Arts and Social Action in Research' in (<http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar>).

It combines the participatory action-research methods of participatory theatre and walking methods in order to understand the way in which racialized migrant women challenge their exclusion and subjugation in the context of the United Kingdom. The problematic situation of migrant families in the United Kingdom points to the 'hostile environment' and migratory policy. This policy 'is a sprawling web of immigration controls embedded in the heart of our public services and communities'. The government requires employers, landlords, private sector workers, NHS staff and other public servants to check a person's immigration status before they can offer them a job, housing, healthcare or other support. Migrant families are casted as outsiders to citizenship, challenging the social and cultural cohesion of the nation. Indeed, UK immigration policies render it difficult for migrant families to secure their social and economic reproduction. Against this backdrop, the researchers explore how racialized migrant families develop their subjugated knowledge to claim belonging and participate in the society they live in. The authors share their the key

methodological findings, challenges and benefits of working with a PAR approach for co-producing knowledge with a potential of fostering transformation, together with migrant families and advocacy organizations. The authors reflect on the potential for transformation of these methods for research purposes and additionally show the use of these methods to develop a kind of citizenship practice of transformation together with research participants.

In Chapter 5: *Action Research in Planning Education: The Legacy of Paulo Freire at Roskilde University*, John Andersen and Martin Severin Frandsen, at Roskilde University, Denmark, tell us that Roskilde University came into being in 1972, as a result from the 1968 student revolt. Established as a critical reform university, it adopted the principle of interdisciplinarity, with the vision to be participant problem-oriented and project learning process (PPL). The university launched a new master's programme in Urban Planning in the year 2009. This chapter presents the experiences from student projects working with action research in facilitating citizen-driven urban development, taking into account the following considerations: In the first place, students outline the key theoretical foundations of the Planning Studies programme: planning as social learning, empowerment and social mobilization. Secondly, the principles of Roskilde University pedagogical model (PPL) are rooted in the tradition of experiential and critical pedagogy of Oskar Negt, John Dewey, Paulo Freire and others.

The chapter presents two concrete cases of problem-oriented projects working with action research in bottom-up urban planning and sustainable transition in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark. The first case concerns the empowerment of young residents in the redesign of a public square through a series of aesthetic experiments. The second case concerns an experiment with alternative transport solutions and sustainable ways of street redesign through the reduction of private car use and the creation of new public spaces on former parking lots. The article concludes with the authors contending that action research in problem-oriented project work is a promising way of involving students in community empowerment processes. Doing participatory action-research strengthens the student's ability to comprehend 'the logic of practice' and their ability to master practical and ethical judgements, in the context of complex real-world empowerment and learning processes. This prepares them for professional practice and provides an embodied and pragmatically empowered understanding of how transformations towards a more sustainable and just society can be brought about.

In Chapter 6: 'The Movement towards Knowledge Democracy in Participatory and Action Research', Erik Lindhult, at the University of Mälardalen, Eskilstuna, Sweden, tells us that one common feature of different variants of participatory and action research is a rejection of technocratic, undemocratic tendencies in science and enquiry. Their purpose is to break the dominance of traditional academic views of science, while opening it up for broader participation of people and emancipating knowledge creation that can produce actionable knowledge with transformative potentials. The purpose of this contribution is to recognize and clarify a striving for 'knowledge democracy', a recent concept still in the process of initial formulation. In this early stage, knowledge democracy denotes a global mobilizing and unifying thinking, to

articulate scattered networks and movements in the world, engaged in participatory-oriented research. This vision is rooted in the First Global Assembly for Knowledge Democracy in June 2017, Cartagena, Colombia. Based on his experiences, discussions and mutual reflection in and on this movement in thinking and practice, the author clarifies the emerging meaning and significance of knowledge democracy in a practical, political and at the same time utopian context of engagement and struggle of people engaged in alternative approaches to enquiry and transformation.

In Chapter 7: Frans Lenglet, an independent educational researcher in Uppsala, examines the evolution of ‘transformative education’, against the background of the world’s existential and wicked problems that are posing formidable challenges to mainstream education and learning approaches. This chapter examines the evolution and intellectual sources of theories of education and learning that explicitly focus on transforming the learners’ self-understanding as well as the structures, arrangements and formations in which these and their educational and learning processes are embedded. These theories spanning over the last 50 years go beyond the functionalist understanding of education and learning are meant to socialize learners, within existing or dominant cultural and societal structures and/or in function of the transmission of knowledge, skills and attitudes from generation to generation. The ideas of transformative learning or learning for transformation are examined borrowing insights from Freire, Habermas, Mezirow and other. The later discussion continues with an examination of the concepts of collaborative learning, social learning and deliberative social learning, as these evolve into transformative and transgressive learning, by i.a. Wals and Lotz-Sisitka. In the process, a colourful tapestry of transformative education and learning emerges. As shown over time, the pertinence of transformative learning has not diminished but only increased. The evolution of transformative learning presents itself as a virtual cycle, starting from marginalized and ‘excluded’ people and communities via persons (individuals) engaged in adult education and environmental education, to (groups of) people participating in collaborative and transgressive social learning, thereby becoming capable and empowered actors in processes of change and transformation.

In Chapter 8: ‘Finding Hope in the Midst of an Absurd University’, Professor Vicente Manzano-Arrondo at Universidad de Sevilla, Spain, confides that it is unfortunately too easy to find examples of absurd functioning in the university. It has never been a perfect institution because that is an impossibility. One observes in recent years that the chronic problems afflicting universities have not disappeared. In the face of a steamroller working at the planetary level, the university has plunged into an even greater absurdity. Paradoxically, we observe that the institution created to be free and work for human emancipation through the expansion of knowledge has chosen to submit itself as a slave to the dynamics of the current global model of society. In doing so, it further fosters slavery by strengthening this global hegemony. Three examples of absurd modus operandi of universities follow next. The first example alludes to the recruitment and shaping of obedient teachers.