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## LEARNING TO UNLEARN FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING, AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIEW

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## GOAL

To raise awareness among teachers of the importance of the processes of learning to unlearn and relearn as part of our educational responsibility and continuous training.

**Abstract:** The present work corresponds to a reflection on various theories and approaches to learning and their relevance in the training of social agents, a reflection that emerges from the practice of training, and taking into account the fact that the meaning of what learning entails and how it is learned is not at the center of the discussion in universities in Latin America, in which more emphasis is placed on what to teach rather than how to teach.

**Keywords:** Learning, unlearning, relearning and continuing education

## JUSTIFICATION

The present work corresponds to a reflection on various theories and approaches to learning and their relevance in the training of social agents, a reflection that emerges from the practice of training, and taking into account the fact that the meaning of what learning entails and how it is learned is not at the center of the discussion in universities in Latin America, in which more emphasis is placed on what to teach rather than how to teach.

Without attempting to analyze praxis or be a guide on how to implement the transition from the prevailing training model, called informational, to another with a transformational nature, the working hypothesis on the training of social agents and, in particular, leadership training, is based on the importance of understanding the concept of learning, how to learn and, therefore, how to teach, given that adults need to unlearn, at the same time as learning, to achieve transformational learning that allows

them not only to acquire new knowledge but also stimulate the modification of behavior in light of the review of their own frames of reference.

To achieve this proposal, learners and also teachers will have to review not only what they do, but how they think and who they are. The process is not only cognitive, it is also emotional and corporal. Therefore, a dynamic and integrated approach is proposed, which works in the three fields and that in each of them the concept of unlearning is the driving idea. Additionally, a series of approaches are suggested, such as first, second and third cycle learning and paradigm review; among others.

## INTRODUCTION

It is almost incredible that, in Higher Education and Training centers, more emphasis is placed on what is taught, content, and not on how it is taught, methodologies, and that more experts are hired in certain specialized areas of knowledge but that they do not. They have been trained in the methodological aspect.

Observations made in various educational centers in Latin American countries show that the importance of the pedagogical process itself is downplayed, and that this limitation does not only occur at higher levels of education, but also at secondary and primary levels, although in the latter the symptom is less. That is, less attention is paid to pedagogical development in higher education centers, generally focused on the search and transfer of knowledge as information, than in primary and secondary education centers, today, in Chile, under the reform process, precisely in the review of their pedagogical approaches.

And this does not happen due to a lack of theories and/or research in the field of epistemology, namely, authors such as Humberto Maturana and previously Paulo

Freire, offer us a very good reference to understand that we must worry about how to teach based on a knowledge of how we learn, and, if the learning is not adequate, how we unlearn.

This problem is addressed, as a reflection, and shared in this document, some conclusions reached from the premises implicit in an analysis of the dynamic and essential process in education such as learning. And it is approached from the depth of what is meant by learning and how useful it is to unlearn, postulating that this dynamic sheds greater light on the teaching process.

The reflections presented are supported by more than a decade of experience in the training of young people in educational centers of different levels and of training carried out for both teachers and students, in addition to the exchange of ideas with colleagues in relation to the topic and specialized bibliographic review. Everything most relevant and relevant to the topic was pointed out to give way to a proposal that is offered not to be a practical guide, but as a reflection that invites us to continue investigating and raising awareness that the problem persists and is rooted. in the work of educational centers.

So, the purpose of this work is, at the same time as a reflection, an invitation to educational agents to reconsider the concepts already mentioned: learning, how to learn, how to unlearn and therefore, how to teach. Also, to consider the hypothesis that maintains that adults require unlearning at the same time as learning, to achieve transformational learning, and thus contribute to dynamic and meaningful learning.

The document is organized into six sections. The first attempts to analyze the approaches and concepts of traditional, informational education and learning, and why they persist in current times and the need to move from this approach to one more in

line with the rhythm of post-modern society, namely, a transformational approach. In turn, it leads to proposing what is understood by education: object of analysis in the second section, where both transformative education and, as its variant, meaningful education, are defined. In light of the above, the third section opens a new key aspect for learning aimed at modifying behavior, which for the author is the essence of education and training. Likewise, the importance of the unlearning process and its connection with vigorous learning is carried out, in summary.

In the fifth section, some possible learning strategies are briefly indicated that would make it possible to energize the process, giving relevance to teaching practice in the processes of change. In the sixth and final sections, a final reflection is made that summarizes and explains the main proposals of this document: From information to transformation.

## **LEARNING TO UNLEARN FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING, AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIEW**

### **EDUCATION AND LEARNING: A STAGNANT PROCESS?**

“The most perfect image of the Cosmos is the river...” This sentence expressed by Heraclitus of Ephesus in the 6th century BC, ‘to refer to the continuous evolution of what exists, is very applicable today in the field of knowledge and therefore in relation to truths that sustain human beings. Then, given that truths are constantly changing, a kind of negotiation occurs regarding which ones will or will not be accepted to attribute meaning to things, events and the human being himself. If this is so, it is contradictory to try to make teaching a simple process of transferring information from a subject who teaches (teacher or trainer) to a subject who learns (student or apprentice); furthermore,

it is a gnoseological pretension of a dogmatic nature., where the teacher claims that knowledge is reduced to data and that he is the possessor of such knowledge.

What could we say then about the master classes? As a transfer of knowledge they are valid, but if we consider that knowledge is not something given, but is constructed, as proposed by the cognitive theories of learning among which we can highlight Piaget, Ausubel, Gagné, among others, we must conclude that all teacher-centered pedagogical practice is insufficient. Hence, it is necessary to review and/or generate strategies that promote discussion on topics that promote a change in perspective, which does not mean in any way suppressing the flow of information, but rather changing the form, viewing education not as a product, but as a process.

If we consider the approach of Mezirow (2000) and Kegan (1982, 1994, 2000), who based on the approaches of Piaget and Freire, we can consider that a transformational approach is necessary, which implies looking at how it is learned, how it is thought, what we understand by education and what are the implications of transformative learning, aspects that will be considered below. According to Mezirow, "Transformative learning refers to the process through which we transform established frames of reference (perspectives of meaning, habits of thought, mental frames...etc.) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change. and reflective, in such a way that they generate beliefs and opinions that prove to be more true and justified so that they generate action."

The permanence of the emphasis on the content or information seems to make sense if we take into account that the person who is capable of mastering a lot of information and transferring it, whether from European or North American authors, and who can cite

these authors as support, is considered wise. to their knowledge, without further analysis or discernment. It is assumed that, if someone whose fame has transcended, what is said is true, and that is how one must proceed. A kind of dependence on thought occurs, a denial of the possibility of being authentic and generating new proposals more in line with reality. For example, Finnish education is very good, its methodology, principles and values are very relevant, but for Finns, not for Latin America.

Another reason for maintaining the tradition is the fear teachers have of being confronted by students with questions they may not be able to answer. They feel questioned in their wisdom and authority, given that they assume the category of experts based on the infallibility of their knowledge. Thus, the concept "education" refers to various meanings and theories, as many as perspectives of what is intended when one wants to teach. But what we do agree on is that there is no unintentional educational process, and necessarily behind each meaning of the concept, an idea of society, of being human, and of learning is implicit.

If education is considered as a process of information transfer, a predominant trend in various educational settings, and in which this information is called "content" by teachers and "subject" by students, the emphasis is on what to teach, and the concept of the student is that of a passive subject in which a standardized level of mastery of the contents established as mandatory must be achieved. This is so from a behaviorist perspective of learning where the response must be the expected, uniform and quantifiable, which necessarily results in overestimating knowledge as a simple cognitive process, of a rational and memoristic nature, and not considering other elements that they are also combined in the learning process, as are the emotional and

physical aspects.

In this process focused on what to teach, the subject who learns as a person is ignored, he is considered rather a passive entity that must be filled with information, this is what Freire called banking education in his work "Pedagogy of the oppressed" (1970) and from which I will take a fragment: "In banking education there are two types of differentiated subjects, the educator and the student.

The educator is the one who knows, the only one who has knowledge. He is the one who transmits his knowledge to the student. The learner receives this knowledge from the educator without participating in the process, let's say it is like a filing cabinet... This education refers to reality as something static, stopped, divided with contents totally foreign to the learner."

We must also consider that the rationalist and categorizing heritage of Greco-Roman culture exerts its millennial influences on the ways of thinking of our Latin America, from Aristotle and his consideration of the human being as a rational animal to Hegel, ("Everything rational is real") Descartes and Kant among others, has paid homage to reason and leaves aside the set of emotional and bodily capacities that are also involved in the learning process. Rational categorizations are useful, but they do not allow us to see reality completely, nor to understand ourselves in a changing world in which we can dialogue from a holistic perspective.

Knowledge constitutes the main basis for the exercise of people, their wealth and well-being and that of society. The right to access knowledge gives the opportunity to participate in social, cultural and economic life, increasing any possibility of true social inclusion, and in turn increases the improvement of employability, through continuing education.

Now, moving towards a knowledge society also implies inequalities and social exclusion.

An effort that involves teaching is to shorten this gap and increase the educational level of adults and the emerging need for lifelong education.

In this sense, the challenges for the training of people today are much broader and more complex, which increasingly refer to how to develop human resources for the benefit of each and every student in the school system, taking as their center what they are. the skills that have the greatest impact on students' growth as a whole person.

Knowledge about how cognitive processes work in the brain allows:

- Develop the natural way the child's brain learns.
- Understand how the physical, emotional and intellectual domains are naturally integrated in the child and provide an appropriate learning environment for her self-discovery.
- Create meaningful, engaging experiences for children to explore, evaluate and learn.

Knowing the neurobiological principles that govern children's cognitive and affective development provides the teacher with the tools to harmoniously enrich and enhance the talents of each student and thus allow learning to be a process that produces a relatively permanent change in the way of feeling, thinking and acting of the student and teachers.

From the above we can affirm that teaching is facilitating the conditions for the expected changes to occur in the student's behavior.

The question is: where do we start?

By knowing the organ that allows us to be, learn, do, be, love, live and coexist, and that in our brain, which allows us to learn, unlearn and then relearn, from a young age and for continuous education.



## EDUCATION AS A SIGNIFICANT PROCESS

Our condition as social beings leads us to understand the educational process as a highly significant process, a process of encounter between two human realities with circumstances, beliefs, ideas and experiences: the subject who teaches and the subject who learns. These roles are not fixed, since it is an encounter between people, and people have a world that is their own and a world that is shared, and, in the shared world, today is access to information fluidly through cyberspace. Therefore, it is necessary to reaffirm the need to change the emphasis in education, and move it from the focus of what to teach, to how we learn, what are the factors that make effective and dynamic learning possible and what must be kept in mind when considering to the person of the subject who learns.

First, we must reject the concept of learning as an exclusively rational process, and consider at least two theories, that of multiple intelligences, Howard Gardner, and that of emotional intelligence, Daniel Goleman. The first considered that for the development of life one needs or makes use of more than one type of intelligence, which are presented as a network of autonomous sets related to each other, and among which we can mention mathematical logic, linguistics, space etc. And the second, Goleman, considers that the ability to recognize our emotions and those of others makes it possible to develop social skills, motivate ourselves, etc. theories, both of which are very important to expand the understanding of the learning process and which must be kept in mind when teaching. Add to this part of the message that Humberto Maturana, Chilean biologist and epistemologist, gave to educators in the Bío Bío region, Chile, at the start ceremony of the 2017 school year: "Love educates." If we create a space that welcomes, that listens, in

which we tell the truth and answer questions and give ourselves time to be there with the boy or girl, that boy or girl will transform into a thoughtful, serious, responsible person who will welcome from oneself. Being able to choose what you do, being able to choose if you want what you chose or not... these are some questions that arise."

Also consider the physiological factor, or body factor, very little valued from traditional paradigms where the mind-body duality prevails as two complementary dimensions, but which in the light of modern theories, among others the contributions of neuroscience, we can understand that they exist at the same time. At least three perceptual modalities or ways of receiving the information that comes to us from the outside and that condition our interpretation of that information, modalities that are recognized with the acronym VAK, to understand that there is a different visual, auditory and kinesthetic modality in different types of subject. From this, it is understandable that not all students interpret the contents presented by the teacher in the same way, if the surrounding reality is not the same for everyone, with which the complexity and richness of learning becomes more interesting and never uniform.

We can then consider that learning is, as the cognitive theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, and others propose, a construction of meanings not only from one or more subjects, but also with the interaction of the social and cultural environment, in which symbols, beliefs, expectations and ways of perceiving reality come together to give meaning to what has been learned.

Considering learning this way, the relationship between the subject who teaches, (or who intends to teach, in Freire's words), teacher or instructor, needs to be one of cooperation. Both, active subjects of the process, owe respect to their being as

people, in the fullest sense of the word, and in which the teacher becomes facilitators of the student's learning, who, based on the development of their potential and Their own experiences give meaning to the experiences that the teacher offers for this purpose. This turns education into a task with meaning, and with possibilities of true social progress where each and every one can effectively learn to be, to know, to do and to have value.

## **LEARNING AS BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION**

In the words of Maturana, "To educate is to live together and, therefore, to agree to live together in a space of reciprocal acceptance in which the emotions and actions of those who live together are transformed according to the conversations that constitute that living together" ("The meaning of the human", 1992)

From this quote, I would like to point out as an essential requirement to say that learning has occurred, that this is reflected in the work of the learner and the teacher, given the dynamics of this process that is not for life, but it is life.

The modification of behavior in any area in which it is required cannot be imposed, since it entails a value framework that is generated from the person as such, in their way of perceiving the environment and themselves. Learning modifies behavior only when the change occurs in the subject as such, and this is possible with an education and/or training that considers and respects the person's integrity. To do this, it is necessary to learn to unlearn and learn again according to the requirements of the time and space in which the subject or subjects find themselves, a task that is difficult, but necessary. (Some reasons that generate resistance to change have already been explained).

## **UNLEARNING AS A DYNAMIC STRATEGY**

In a world of constant changes, the task of learning to unlearn becomes imperative, as has already been mentioned, especially in the field of education and training. There are several authors who have dealt with the subject, among others Moreno

Olivos (2005) and Cegarra and Rodrigo (2004) who consider it necessary for teachers to learn to unlearn because they must prepare students to face the future. From its postulates, we can describe the sequence of steps necessary to unlearn:

1.- Place yourself in the here and now (reality): Recognize what happens and to whom it happens, assume that there are learnings from the past that are not valid in the present (now) and others that may be valid in another context, but not the one where it is located (here).

2.- Distinction between personal opinion (subjective) and a general principle or rule. All subjects have personal experiences, but they cannot be taken as valid criteria for situations in another context. To stay trapped in personal judgment is to abandon the possibility of growth and knowledge. This is a step that requires humility, and every human being has the right to their opinion, but they must recognize that it is just that... opinion.

3.- Preparation of the personal and/or collective map. Objectively evaluate learning based on the contrast between the interpretation of reality (map) and reality itself, a step that is possible only in the exchange of opinions, experiences and knowledge.

4.- Search for new perspectives, understandings and solutions to evaluate whether what is considered valid, what

has been learned, is still relevant, current and valid for the field to which it refers. If not, the next step is taken...

5.- Unlearn: It is advisable to make a list of what has been considered "invalid" and proceed to eliminate it. (This is the most difficult step, since the accumulation of knowledge is one of the most deeply rooted claims to wisdom in our Western culture, and there is a lot of literature about it).

If this step is taken, the reconstruction continues, or rather, with the possibility of new learning.

6.- Reconstruction of learning and sharing it: This step needs to be done together, both in the generating phase and in the installation or legitimization phase. Let us remember that every learning process is generated in coexistence with the other or others, in exchange spaces full of affectivity.

7.- Return to the transformed reality: New perspectives make new paths possible. Once the most significant aspects are reconsidered, a broader perspective is acquired that allows generating more relevant knowledge, but never definitive, therefore it will often be necessary to unlearn again.

It is necessary to point out that, although the steps can be enumerated, this is not a mechanical process, as is no human process, it requires reflection on the subject and both individual and collective motivation, it is necessary to abandon the comfort of tradition to innovate, generating changes that bring us closer to the possibility of understanding our environment and ourselves.

## UNLEARNING IS A COMPLEX PHENOMENON THAT HAS AT LEAST THREE LIMITATIONS

1.- The individual factor given by resistance to change. Whether due to dogmatism, comfort, fear of innovating, there is, as has already been analyzed, a tendency to do the same thing and in the same way.

2.- The biological factor: It is known, from neuroscience studies, that the brain has great plasticity, but this manifests itself more strongly in the first years of life, and decreases as age increases. However, if a constant activity of new neuronal connections and new learning is maintained, the brain responds adequately to changes even in adulthood, safeguarding exercise and adequate nutrition.

3.- The social factor: Social influences that reinforce negative visions of changes exist and weigh, being more common to highlight failures than successes. This, added to a strong success-oriented and competitive conception, obstructs the possibility of innovation, mainly in the field of secondary schools, where studying is identified with absorbing content that is then measured with standardized tests.

Changes are possible when considering transformative learning is to overturn traditional conceptions and acquire the ability to constantly transform ourselves and develop that same capacity in our students, a transformation that implies changing our frames of reference that we had for sure, and being able to build new ones, more inclusive, demanding, open and flexible.



## STRATEGIES THAT ENERGIZE THE UNLEARNING PROCESS

The studies that have been carried out in this regard emphasize resistance to change, but show that it is possible. There are models that can be applied, of which there are successful experiences at different levels of teaching; some are described as examples:

1.- The inverted classroom or Flipped Classroom, which consists of changing the traditional method in which the teacher is the center of the class and whose job is to pass the contents to achieve learning in passive students who will have to incorporate them uniformly. The roles are reversed and now the students will be the protagonists of the process, and in an interactive process, they will learn dynamically.

The characteristics of this model are more or less the following:

a) The interaction of students with the materials: this must be prepared in advance by the teacher and/or the students according to the objectives of the class. They can be cards, documentaries, videos, etc.

b) Use of ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies), which are available to everyone and which, when used in a programmed manner and with a clear purpose, allow access to updated, diverse and relevant information. contents that must be treated.

c) Active learning: it has been said that the shortcomings of traditional methods are, among others, the emphasis on what to teach.

The emphasis is on how to learn, and with this model a dynamic, active and participatory learning is generated, since it is the student who discovers, with

the help of the teacher, now converted into a guide and facilitator, the various possibilities of building knowledge from his own experiences.

d) Promotes dialogue, cooperation, autonomous thinking and the generation of ideas: Being a participatory model, the student feels responsible for the process, no longer in an individualistic way, but with a team spirit, eliminating that competitive desire that so much damage has been done to the formation of people. The collaboration that is achieved generates in the students a sense of responsibility in the processes, also developing other essential values such as respect, tolerance, and, by generating their personal vision, they dare to exchange ideas and substantiate them.

e) It is a model that takes advantage of higher cognitive processes such as analysis, evaluation and application.

Once students begin to appreciate the freedom that a collaborative and open model such as the Flipped Classroom provides, they will be more motivated to take control and carry out learning outside the classroom.

2.- Problem-based learning (PBL) is a strategy that arises from the previous model (AI) and whose purpose is for the student to build their learning, develop their skills and attitudes through real-life actions, which will allow the student be able to analyze and face problems in the same way they will do in their professional development.

The most relevant characteristic of PBL is the use of problems as a starting point for the acquisition of new knowledge, which entails a role for the student and not the teacher, who will become a facilitator of the process, not a transmitter of information. The process begins by presenting a problem,

then identifying learning needs, finding the necessary information, and then returning to the problem.

It is a very valuable method because knowledge management is not based on the information given by the teacher, it focuses on the student's search for this knowledge, thus generating reflective practice, teamwork and adaptation to changes.

3.- The Socratic Dialogues: Although it is true that today the use of ICT is essential in teaching, so is discussion and thematic analysis. Learning to argue with reasons, express ideas, learn to listen, be tolerant are also necessary learning, and learning by doing plays a fundamental role in the development of these skills.

In Socratic dialogues, the teacher's role is also secondary, and consists of guiding the discussion based on topics and readings given in advance. Those who participate are the students, asking questions, giving their opinion, highlighting the information collected. By contrasting ideas, achieving consensus, students will form new judgments regarding the topic, giving rise to new learning built together, and if doubts and/or points of disagreement arise, new discussions, new research and perhaps new consensus.

This methodology also energizes the educational process, and reinforces the possibility of unlearning and relearning; when worked methodically, it becomes an effective tool for the teacher.

When presenting these strategies, the entire development process described in the relevant bibliography has not been detailed, only a succinct description has been made as a way of inviting people to venture into these and other similar strategies, today available to everyone in cyberspace., and, if the need for it has really been understood, then we can say that transformational learning will be a reality.

## REFLECTION

The topic of learning and learning to unlearn is a topic rooted in pedagogy and that runs through the entire educational process, and basically consists of daring to think and do things differently from how they have been thought and done previously, which requires having the audacity and courage to abandon security and dogmatism to enter the world of possibility. It is an essential concept in the process of But not only in education is it necessary to learn to unlearn, also in the business, environmental and social world in general, given that the world is constantly changing and with it the sphere of knowledge.

To learn to unlearn we need to consider that learning is not a passive process that is only rational in nature, it is also emotional and corporal, and, as we advance in age, it is more difficult to unlearn, since beliefs are more deeply rooted and plasticity is lost. cerebral, unless we incorporate the habit of constantly innovating.

Learning to unlearn is a transformation process that turns us into active subjects, capable of generating significant changes at both a personal and social level, which leads to appreciating our environment and community life, discarding competition and success to enter into a idea of more sustainable progress.

Although transformational learning is complex, just as learning to unlearn is complex, it is possible and necessary; it invites us to reflect on ourselves and our work as human beings in a world of which we are part, and that of our ability to understanding the processes of change and adapting to them creatively, our survival will depend neither more nor less.

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