

## **Toward social-transformative education**

*an ontological critique of self-directed learning*

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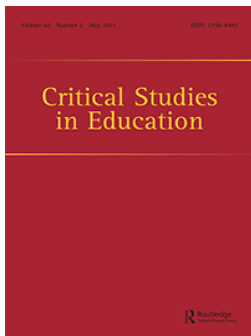
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# Toward social-transformative education: an ontological critique of self-directed learning

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to critique the individualistic ontological premises of ‘self-directed learning’, as it has been developed in humanist education literature in the tradition of Carl Rogers. The authors suggest instead that social-transformative education and its critical social ontology serve the emancipatory promise of education better while offering the possibility to tackle the collective challenges of our time. Beginning with an analysis of Rogers’ concepts of Self, Knowledge and Society, the authors aim to show that self-directed learning fails to live up to its emancipatory promise. Instead, the paper picks up and develops on a debate in the early SDL literature between Rogers and Paulo Freire, suggesting that Freire’s ontological premises are incompatible with those of Rogers, yet better prepare students to identify and face social problems. The authors further develop this point through the cultural-historical analysis of speech of Lev Vygotsky, cementing a social understanding of the Self as the foundation of social-transformative education. The paper concludes on the implications of this analysis for educational practice.

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Self-directed learning; social transformative education; Freire; Rogers; Vygotsky; philosophy of education; higher education; poststructural/postmodern/critical theory

## Introduction

According to Guglielmino (2013) ‘preparation for self-directed learning (SDL) is essential in twenty-first-century educational institutions’ – a sentiment seemingly widely shared in the field of higher education. From Harvard University in the US (Dutchen, 2013) to the prestigious Oxbridge institutions in the UK (University of Cambridge, 2018; University of Oxford, 2018), the biggest names in higher education are enjoining their students to become self-directed learners. This call for self-direction in learning echoes through so many university mission statements that it is impossible to list them all, it is widely cited in the publications of education service providers and ministries of education from Singapore (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2015) to the USA (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), and international institutions such as the EU (European Commission, 2013) and UNESCO (UNESCO, 2016). The aspiration for self-directed learning seems omnipresent in education parlance, buoyed by a wide range of

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academic literature – a search for the key term ‘self-directed learning’ in Google Scholar yields nearly 90,000 results – though this does not imply that such popularity in discourse translates into omnipresence in practice. Nevertheless, the fact that it is being touted as essential for the future and so widely aspired to is sufficient justification for investigating its origins, assumptions and implications.

The term ‘self-directed learning’ emerged in the 1970s, steeped in humanistic education principles and principally following the works of American educators Knowles (1975), Houle (1961) and Tough (1971). Concretely, the basis of Knowles’ popular method was a ‘learning contract’ – an agreement made between the teacher and the student on the student’s personal (and unspecified) learning goals, and the metrics by which the teacher and the student could agree that the objectives have been achieved and thus obtain a grade. The students then did their work, and their achievements at the end of the work period were measured against their contract to award the appropriate grade.

The 1980s were a seminal moment for SDL, as a critique of its ontological premises (Geller, 1982) made way for empirical and practice-oriented research (Caffarella & O’Donnell, 1987) that broadened its scope far beyond the method advocated by Knowles and took on the meaning of any project conducted independently by adult learners. The popularity of SDL as a concept for education practice and research took flight during the 1990s and early 2000s, often coupled with ‘lifelong-learning’ (Candy, 1991) and ‘problem-based learning’ (Barrows, 1983; Blumberg, 2000). At this point, SDL had little to do with a specific pedagogical method and more to do with the belief that individual students should be responsible for finding their own learning resources, managing their learning time, and developing their own learning objectives. From the 1990s onwards, SDL was touted as a sound life-long ‘learning to learn’ strategy for students to hone their ability to meet to future (and yet unknown) employer demands in a competitive job market (Boyatzis, 1999; Gerber, Lankshear, Larsson, & Svensson, 1995), but its underlying assumptions were no longer investigated or debated. Yet as higher education’s focus on the individual student as a proto-worker has increased, we question the ability of self-directed learning to prepare students for the collective challenges that are taking centre stage in the twenty-first century. Humanity finds itself in the eye of a perfect storm of crises: a sharp increase economic inequality (Oxfam, 2019); political upheavals and threats to progressive democracy; impending climate catastrophe (IPCC, 2018)... the list goes on. The common denominator between these issues is a global social dimension that calls for collective action. We submit and will justify in this paper that higher educational methods focused exclusively on individual learners are failing to provide students with the means to analyse the social components of collective problems, to help students to understand their place in collective issues, and to empower them to act upon societal problems.

Given these challenges, the aim of this paper is to examine the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie ‘self-directed learning’, with a view to exposing its fundamentally individualistic views of Self and Learning and challenging its ability to meet our present educational needs. We want to suggest that the individualistic rationale implied in SDL is unable to adequately prepare students to address societal challenges, and an alternative rationale for higher education is urgently needed. We will, therefore, introduce the concept of social-transformative education to

supersede SDL. To draw the contours of social-transformative education, we will propose a re-evaluation of both Self and Learning in light of Freire's Dialogical Theory of Action and Vygotsky's Cultural History perspective, thus building upon existing critiques of SDL in the literature (Geller, 1982; O'Hara, 1989), while providing a stronger case for a critical educational approach than has been done before. Borrowing from these theories, we hope to bring to light the social nature of Self, Knowledge and Learning, and close our analysis by expanding on why social-transformative education will leave students better equipped to deal with our current and future societal needs than SDL.

### The phenomenal self in Rogers' 'self-directed learning'

In this section, we deconstruct the philosophical assumptions about Self and Knowledge that underpin SDL using the theories of Rogers as a starting point for the analysis.

Although the term 'self-directed learning' was made famous by Knowles, his ideas can be directly traced back to the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers and his colleagues from the University of Chicago starting in the 1940s (Brockett & Donaghy, 2005; Knowles, 1989). Rogers was an American psychologist, psychotherapist and educationist who developed psychotherapeutic principles premised on the notion that humans are endowed with an unlimited potential for good, waiting to be unleashed. For Rogers, Man was defined and differentiated from other animals by his potential for self-actualization, a term borrowed from his colleague Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1943). An 'actualized', or 'fully-functioning' person was someone living congruently with his 'true' self through an organismic valuing process. This curious vernacular denoted a criticism of the unhealthy valuing processes of adults, their 'natural' valuing process having been tampered with during childhood by the disapproving words and conditional regard of parents and peers. Congruency could only be restored when persons divorced self-perception from early social trauma and aligned instead their concept of Self with the values transmitted by this ill-defined 'core' or 'organism' in every moment, as they arose. Yet Rogers was starkly unspecific as to what this core might be, ontologically speaking. This commitment to self-actualization formed the foundation on which 'self-directed learning' was built in Rogerian education theory. Rogers first attempted to codify his educational ideas in *Client-centred Therapy* (1951/2003), but his chief work on education was published in 1969 under the title *Freedom to Learn*, in which he detailed the need for and means to achieving self-directed learning. By his own admission, these ideas were inspired by existentialism; in particular, the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and the psychology of Viktor Frankl (Rogers, 1969). He was impressed by Kierkegaard's notion that truth is contingent on personal meaning-making, and Frankl's proposition that the search for meaning drives Man. In analysing Rogers' conception of the Self, it is worth keeping in mind the existentialist antecedents of his thinking.

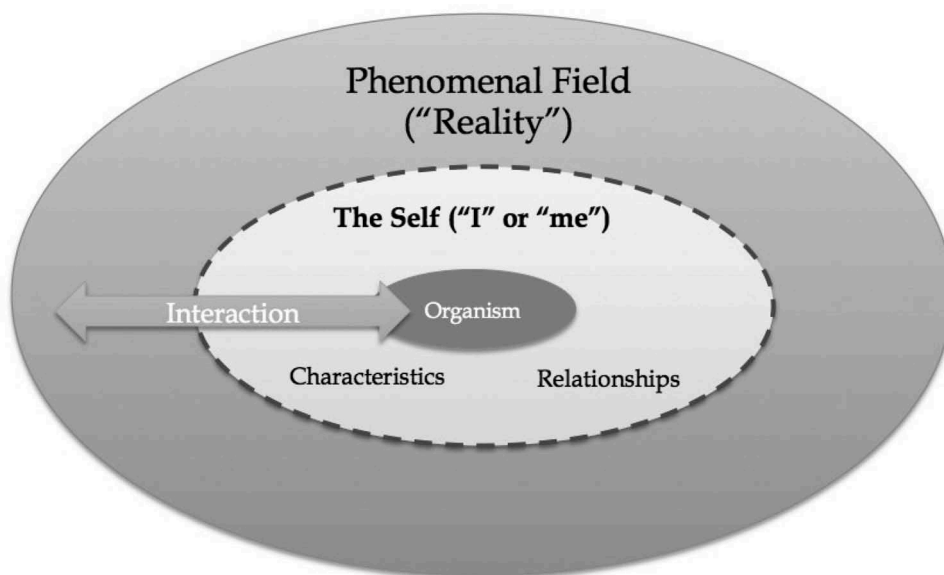
There are three inter-related philosophical assumptions underlying Rogers' work, namely about the Self, Knowledge and Society, that all shape SDL. We shall expound each one in turn before exposing the consequent meaning of Rogerian SDL

### **The self according to Rogers**

Rogers never meaningfully explored the ontological implications of his idealistic, almost naturalistic notion of the Self, and yet upon these assumptions rests the credibility of his theory of learning – we must, therefore, explore them for him. The Self was for Rogers a conceptual pattern of perceptions, characteristics and relationships existing in a phenomenal field to which values could be ascribed by a core ‘organism’ – which is the ‘true Self’ with which the Self must actualise if the person is to be fully functioning. The field is phenomenal because it is limited by the range of a person’s experience of the world, which determines the extent of that person’s reality.

But what is this organism? Even though Rogers heavily hinted that the organism is a pre-conscious, possibly even physical entity, it makes no sense to consider that this is merely the physical body, to which the mind should submit. This would negate free choice and render the mind a slave to the physical needs and wants of the body, a position that leaves us little better off than animals, and is wholly inconsistent with Rogers’ claim that Man is free. Geller (Geller, 1982, p. 59) posited instead that Rogers starts with ‘the erroneous if not incoherent assumption that the true self is an immaterial, unchanging thing-like substance that can be an object of exploration and discovery but not a subject or agent’.

If the organism is a thing-like substance, then it cannot be a non-positional entity devoid of identity, as the existentialist Sartre would describe it. Indeed, whereas Sartre presented the Self as ‘empty’ (Sartre, 1943) and ontologically separate from things that are ‘in-themselves’ including the human body, the organism posited by Rogers has qualities with which the person’s concept of Self should seek to align. This is deeply problematic in that in order to make sense of his claim that all humans are naturally good, Rogers must assume that this core towards which the Self actualises is pre-social (otherwise it would not be *a priori* good). It is against this pre-social notion of the true Self that we shall argue in the second part of this paper.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual representation of Rogers’ theory of the Self.

### ***Impact of Rogers' theory of self on knowledge***

If reality is limited by the phenomenal field, as supposed by Rogers, it follows that 'truth' is also thereby constrained – a fact can only become a fact to the learner when it penetrates the phenomenal field through the transformational process of experience (Figure 1). Social reality being, according to humanists, the sum of individual phenomenal fields, constrained by the irreconcilable experiences of separate persons, it is in every moment fluid and unpredictable. In the context of Rogerian reality's kaleidoscopic morphing act, factual knowledge is obsolete almost the instant it is acquired. Therefore, the only thing worth learning for Rogers is the *process of learning itself*; learning to solve problems, mastering the art of reasoning and sharpening one's ability to learn. Furthermore, Rogers posited that the methods of positivism constitute an evil that stands the way of human actualization. Instead, all human sciences should be approached phenomenologically, as sciences of understanding rather than prediction. In this impossibly ephemeral knowledge-world, how are learners to know what to learn? They know organismically what they want to learn, and should, therefore, let this 'organism' guide them towards knowledge that is relevant to them as a learner at that moment. And thus, the seeds of SDL were sown.

### ***Impact of Rogers' theory of self on our relation to the world***

The final assumption of importance for understanding SDL is Rogers' view on individuals' relation to the world around them. If individuals are separated by their phenomenal bubbles of experience, then how does one relate to others? For Rogers, our emotions are the tie that binds us. He does not place value on the notion of a collective other, a 'society' greater than the sum of its parts, and instead understands the social world as a series of interpersonal emotional relationships. Since individuals cannot experience anything other than their own phenomenal field, the best they can do to let others understand their reality is to communicate their experience in the most real way possible, as it happens in the moment, thereby generating a 'social' bond that is defined as a point of contact between internal states moving outward in the World. To build this social bond, individuals need to feel that their concept of Self will not be challenged by others – threats and challenges cause people to close themselves to their organism and to others – instead, self-actualization requires an environment of psychological safety. Transposing this to education, if the learners were to open themselves up to learning then the learning environment should be as free of threats to the Self as the therapist's room. The classroom should be a haven where students and teachers can meet as 'real' people.

### ***Breaking down Rogers' self-directed learning***

In humanist theory, the learner alone knows what is important for them to learn, since one person's reality is incommensurable with another's. The consequence is that the only valid form of education is *self-directed learning*: learning guided by the person's organismic valuing of his own interests and desires. What if those interests are destructive or nihilistic? For Rogers, this is not possible because the true Self is naturally



good and therefore all students once set free are driven to learn, discover, and create and should be treated as such. Thus, teachers can only serve as the facilitators of the student's process of self-discovery – to do this, they must have an open and trusting relationship with their students based on positive regard in a classroom that exudes psychological safety. In this utopian place of learning, the teacher hardly teaches; SDL is a process that is entirely student-guided, where a teacher's advice is merely one signal in the flow of the students' experiences, which they may abide by or ignore mandated by their quest for actualization. Self-directed in its most extreme sense, Rogerian education resembles more a therapy session for educated adults than a classroom. His idea for resolving all educational problems, as proposed in the final chapter of *Freedom to Learn*, is to get representatives of all interest groups involved in education to form an 'encounter' group and talk about their feelings on the education programme openly as 'real' people. In between these groups, learning would happen at the behest of the students and their natural drive for learning that would push them to seek out knowledge. Rogers' vision for education is so unabashedly idealistic and so riddled with assumptions about Self, Knowledge and the World that is it hardly surprising that his viewpoint should come under close scrutiny and critique.

### Developments in self-directed learning theory

Given its emancipatory promise, it is hardly surprising that the humanist conception of the Self and its educational corollary sparked considerable interest after its publication – especially in the peculiar context of the late 1960s and early 1970s where a general discontentment with behaviourist psychology on the one hand, and authoritarian forms of education on the other, created a fertile field to sow the seeds of a new educational paradigm. Almost immediately, educationists began to think of ways to implement SDL and gather concrete, quantified data on its success. The pioneers who implemented SDL in its early days were Houle (1961), Tough (1971) and Knowles (1975), all working originally from the humanist paradigm, but quickly moved to specific, data-driven research rather than Rogers' conceptual work. From there on, the ontological and epistemological assumptions of SDL were put on the back-burner. Tough developed a metric for 'measuring' the readiness of adult learners for self-directed learning from which sprouted a whole branch of research coalescing around the concept of adult learning. By the 1980s, dozens of empirical studies of SDL had been conducted, and the first critiques started to appear (Brockett, 1985; Brookfield, 1984). Those critiques were mostly of a methodological nature but did speak to some of the original flaws of the theory: that the research primarily focused on white, middle-class subjects; that the research focused almost exclusively on individual learners at the expense of the social and political context of learning, and that marginal voices which could be heard through qualitative research were being silenced by an overemphasis on metrics and quantitative data. But with the exception of Geller (1982), there was no systematic attempt to critique Rogers' ontological premise for SDL. In fact, Rogers was almost never mentioned anymore after Knowles.

By the end of the 1980s, two philosophical positions appeared to crystallise around SDL: the first, comprising people like Brookfield and Mezirow, in the 'humanist or existentialist' tradition, the other, a 'liberal progressive' strand initiated by Houle (Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1987). While the former were interested in learning as changes



in consciousness, the latter was interested in learning within the context of one's life span. Neither strand questioned the ontological premises of SDL. Owen (2002) refined the classification by proposing four categories instead: alongside the majority of SDL scholars in the humanist tradition, into which liberal progressivism is subsumed, he proposed neo-behaviourism from a human resources perspective, critical studies, and constructivism. We do not consider the neo-behaviourism described by Owen to be rightly in the spirit of SDL; that is, its conditioning-based approach is merely a form of training which explicitly lacks emancipatory ambition. Owen builds the Constructivist category around the work of Candy (1991), whose writings seem to move the individual even further into a phenomenal bubble: a world of idiosyncratically constructed meanings that further reinforce the individualistic premise of SDL. We feel the need to dwell on the 'branch' of critical pedagogy: Owen cites Paulo Freire as the primary author in the critical school of studies of self-directed learning. He does so likely because of a book written by Rogers in 1977 in which the latter compared himself with Freire and considered their philosophies to be almost identical (Rogers, 1977). We agree with O'Hara's assessment that there is much more that divides Rogers and Freire than Rogers claimed, though we disagree with her that these differences can be overlooked in favour of their similitudes (O'Hara, 1989). But we wish to go further and argue that Freire's views are so ontologically opposed to those of Rogers that Freire's philosophy cannot be considered self-directed learning and calls for the appellation of Social Transformative Education. The debate was left hanging in the literature as interest in these ontological questions waned and the research on SDL in the twenty-first century became more pedagogy-specific, in particular, associated with problem-based learning (Blumberg, 2000; Loyens, Magda, & Rikers, 2008).

We will, therefore, reopen the debate and then call on the work of Lev Vygotsky to lay the ontological foundations of Social Transformative Education in a more systematic manner in the next part of this paper.

### ***Against Rogers – from self-directed learning to social transformative education***

We shall propose a re-interpretation of the Self through two complementary dialectic theories: Freire's Dialogical Theory of Action and Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Psychology. From this, we shall conclude on the need to replace the discourse of self-directed learning with the emphasis on a social transformative focus for higher education.

### ***Freire's dialogical theory of action***

Freire was a Brazilian educator famous for his searing critique of the capitalist system and its consequences for education, the solution to which could only be found in the freeing expression of human agency. Freire, best known for his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/2000), is considered by some the 'seminal architect of introducing critical theory into contemporary pedagogical discourse' (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010).

### *Contrasting the humanism of Rogers and Freire*

We agree with O'Hara (1989) that Rogers and Freire shared a commitment to education as a vehicle for liberation, as well as the view that freedom must come from individual engagement rather than as a gift from the outside. Freire's notion of 'human completion' is on the surface not too different from Rogers' fully functioning person. At several points in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire refers to his cause as 'humanist' (Freire, 1968/2000, pp. 75, 78, 86), calling for educators to trust in the progressive nature of Man. The result of this view, for both Rogers and Freire, was a stark criticism of traditional modes of education. Both thinkers argued that the imposition of content from teachers onto students alienated the student from his own experience and emptied education of meaning.

However, the similarities noted above should not induce the reader into thinking that the two perspectives were aligned. Borrowing inspiration from different branches of existentialism, Freire and Rogers' thinking differed considerably from an ontological perspective. For Freire, the main source of ontological inspiration was not Kierkegaard but Sartre, particularly his ideas on agency (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). Sartre's existentialism turned to political action when he realised that social life was rife with structural incentives for people to act in 'bad faith', thus barring the way to authenticity (Golomb, 1995). Therefore, for Sartre, the priority shifted from the achievement of authenticity to a call for political action that would create the social conditions under which authenticity could be achieved. Sartre became concerned with the fate of humans and their freedom in society rather than the human as a singular, isolated being faced only with itself. His political stance paved the way for the Marxist-existentialist reconciliation that formed the backbone of Freire's philosophy of education. By contrast, Rogers saw no structural cause for inaction, merely an interrelational one that could be fixed by embracing one's real Self within the psychologically safe space of the group encounter.

### *Freire's dialectical self*

Freire believed that structural conditions of oppression stood in the way of human liberation. He drew inspiration from a Marxist reading of the traverses of capitalism for his theory of learning; particularly the idea of a dialectic struggle between oppressors and oppressed. Freire saw in 'banking education' the imposition of the patterns of thinking of the oppressors onto the oppressed in the classroom, thus alienating them from their own experience as human beings. He accused the language of the oppressors in literacy and numeracy education of silencing the oppressed. However, *contra* Marx, Freire did not believe that History was determined to end in a particular way – the dialectic did not have as a necessary conclusion the overthrow of the oppressive system. Instead, sharing Sartre's belief in human agency, Freire posited that liberation was to be a continuing struggle. Siding with the oppressed in this battle, his call to action went through dialogical education: teachers and students working together to unveil reality, critically re-appraising knowledge. In Freire's worldview, there is an objective reality, its true nature hidden by the oppressing elites who do not wish to see it transformed. By filling students' heads with elite ideology, the oppressors deprive students of their creative power to transform the world.

In Freire's Dialogical Theory of Action, the Self is not an inward-looking entity trapped in an idiosyncratic bubble in which others are merely mirrors. Freire spoke against this sort of subjectivism and stated instead:

The dialogical *I* however, knows that it is precisely the *thou* ("not-I") which has called forth his or her own existence. He (*sic*) also knows that the *thou* which calls forth his own existence in turn constitutes an *I* which has in its *I* a *thou*. The *I* and the *thou* thus become, in the dialectic of these relationships, two *thous* which become two *I*'s (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 165).

In other words, it is in the process of dialogue that the Self emerges as the conjoined effort of two beings that become fully human in their joint action. The dialogue here is not meant in the sense intended by Rogers, as an expression of experiential feelings through which the 'real Self' can emerge, but in the sense of a dialectic with its thesis, antithesis and synthesis, which necessarily calls for action. The 'action' component of Freire's theory is as important as the dialogical aspect – it is neither sufficient that men should only reflect on their circumstances, nor is it desirable that they should act without reflection. This relationship between reflection and action Freire called *praxis*; this process was expressed in people's collective ability to *name* the world:

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. (...) Dialogue is the encounter between men (*sic*), mediated by the world, in order to name the world (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 86).

In opposition to Rogers' idea that the Self must adjust to its idiosyncratic experiential world in order to actualize, Freire restored education's power to transform by giving students and teachers the capability to unveil reality through words. Learning in Freire's world was still self-directed in the sense that only individuals could move themselves into action, but this Self does not exist in isolation and cannot succeed in transforming the World without the synergistic relationship it has with other Selves. What might be the subject and method of such an education? Freire suggested the following:

Those truly committed to liberation must (...) abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the *posing of problems of human beings in their relations with the world*. "Problem-posing" education, responding to the essence of consciousness – intentionality – rejects *communiqués* and embodies communication. (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 79).

Thus, we come to define 'problem-posing education' as 'social-transformative' in the sense that it literally calls for students and teachers to collectively transform the World. But to leave our argument at that would not make significant inroads into the ontological and epistemological debate surrounding SDL and critical pedagogy: one could simply agree to disagree about the degree of similarity or difference between Rogers and Freire, which appears to have been the position held by O'Hara (1989). Instead, we will attempt to strengthen the case that the ontological defects of the humanist approach and the educational needs of our era call for moving beyond self-directed learning by using the works of Vygotsky whom we consider to have explained the social nature of being and knowing with the greatest scientific rigour.

### ***Vygotsky's cultural history approach to learning***

Just after the Bolshevik revolution, Vygotsky founded a school of thought known as Cultural-Historical Psychology, which succeeded in producing a rich theoretical and empirical legacy that survived Stalinism (Slunecko & Wieser, 2014). Vygotsky's interest was first in the development of speech and thinking, and later on the more general relationship between human activity (of which speech is a special kind) and thought (Stetsenko, 2005). His take on the Self and Knowledge are less well understood than his ideas on pedagogy but are nonetheless crucial to our understanding of social-transformative education.

### ***Contrasting Rogers' and Vygotsky's self***

Sitting at opposite poles from Rogers, Vygotsky posited that all human activity was woven into a web of social, cultural and historical artefacts that it cannot escape. Thus, from a Cultural History perspective, it would make little sense to speak of peeling back the layers of social interference with the Self to return to organismic valuing since the Self is social, woven into an interpsychological (social) plane. Whatever develops within the intrapsychological (personal) plane cannot be understood without the social, historical and cultural context of the interpsychological plane from whence it formed in the early years of the person's life (Wertsch, 1979).

Vygotsky's concept of the Self serves communication while Rogers' concept of the Self is served by communication. The former posits the primacy of social communication over the Self while the latter sees the Self as the primary entity receiving inputs from communication into its phenomenal field. In other words, the social precedes the individual in Vygotsky's worldview: 'In our conception, the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the social but from the social to the individual' (1987, p. 36).

Like Freire, Vygotsky believed in a dialectic relationship between the Self and society which afforded individuals the power to transform the very social environment that was shaping them through the power of signs, among which speech held a privileged position. As argued by Anh and Marginson (2013, p. 148): 'mediation by signs both responds to and creates historical conditions'. The empowering nature of dialectics was missed in Geller's critique of Rogers that painted the individual as entirely subjected to social forces (Geller, 1982). Vygotsky's dialectics preserved the emancipatory power of being and knowing.

### ***Speech, learning and social-transformative education***

To explain the primacy of the social over the phenomenal, Vygotsky posited that speech was the moulding tool of the mind; and being issued from the interpsychological plane, the product of a historical and cultural context rather than a biological given or an individual construction. Its foremost purpose in early childhood is social, and only later does it become a tool to express inner thoughts (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Wertsch, 1979). Because higher mental functions develop out of the internalization of speech, which is socially constructed, Rogers' 'organismic' valuing process is nonsensical from a Vygotskian perspective.

The reversal of the individual and the social from Rogers to Vygotsky has important consequences: if the Self is a construction issued from social processes, then it would

follow that learning itself must be embedded in the social world, and therefore cannot be the idiosyncratic activity imagined by Rogers; instead of being self-directed, learning must be socially driven. Vygotsky explained this through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a catch-all phrase describing the things that a student is capable of learning with assistance, given his prior knowledge and experience (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 209). As such, students should be guided by more knowledgeable peers that can help them structure the knowledge in their mind and allow them to advance into the ZPD. Vygotsky demonstrated through empirical experiments that spontaneous concepts arising in children's minds from everyday experience in a bottom-up fashion were much richer experientially than scientific concepts, but children struggled to extract themselves from the grounded nature of their experience and produce generalizations and abstractions. Without the systematizing influence of instruction, students would be incapable of making sense of the knowledge they acquired. This finding does not mean that Vygotsky was advocating for top-down instruction or absolving the Self from any responsibility in education. On the contrary, he saw learning as the 'the unique form of cooperation between the child and the adult' (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 169). This theory was applied to adult learning during the cognitive psychology revolution in the 1960s.

In this cooperative process, students need to internalize the signs of speech that the more knowledgeable other uses to guide them in their task. The learning process is still self-directed in the sense that the process of internalization can only be done by the student – knowledge cannot be 'transferred' – but goes beyond SDL, to a self-drive to learn within a social environment structured by speech and interactions on the inter-psychological plane.

Now we can draw the relationship between Freire's concept of 'naming the World' and Vygotsky's theory of speech: Freire's social transformative concept of education could be interpreted as the possibility for students and teachers to dialectically restructure the linguistic artefacts that mediate learning. Freire's dialectic encounter between students and teachers allows the possibility for students to re-appropriate what Wertsch (1979) called 'language-games' (language in the context of human activity) in order to socially construct meanings around their collective reality. Not only can this be done within the student-to-teacher relationship, but also within entire communities. Social-transformative education then means the possibility of changing the structure of the social group's relationship to itself and to the World by dialectically developing the signs needed to understand, then reshape social reality – a possibility afforded by Vygotsky's cultural-history approach but not afforded by Rogers' humanistic approach. We call this 'education' rather than 'learning' to highlight the point that the impact goes beyond mere changes to long-term memory in students; the very constituent parts of the Self, in its totality, face the possibility for transformation.

### **From self-directed learning to social-transformative education**

It is one thing to have a conceptual discussion critiquing the ontological premises of SDL and quite another to consider the implications of this critique for higher education. And yet our paper began by noting that the aspiration for SDL is everywhere in the vocabulary of higher education, calling upon institutions and teachers alike to espouse the individualistic conceptions of students and their learning process within their teaching practices.

We believe that the prevalence of the aspiration for SDL in higher education conveniently coincides with the shift from education as a public good to a private good, with higher education as a responsibility of the State towards society to higher education as the responsibility of individuals towards private corporations, a position also held by other authors (Collini, 2012; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). We would argue that placing the responsibility for the learning process on the shoulders of individuals has certain advantages for cash-strapped universities: it allows them to redirect their content experts towards research, upon which university rankings depend (which in turn affects student numbers and therefore revenue from tuition fees) and leave the teaching to graduate students armed with standardized packages of (online) resources for their students to use. Leaving aside, for now, the unfair disadvantage that this confers students whose socio-economic background does not provide them with the sort of prior knowledge and experience that foster effective self-education in an academic setting, this approach to higher education pits students as individuals competing for excellence in a zero-sum game job market. In this setting, even small-group active learning can be framed as an interpersonal exercise benefiting individual students' 'collaborative skills' or 'interpersonal skills' and other valuable curriculum vitae additions in a competitive market environment.

According to Rogers' theory, SDL should have emancipated young people from the tyranny of professorial authority, made them into self-actualised adults living up to their full potential. Yet contrarily to what Rogers believed, the average student left alone will not encounter his 'real self' in some idealistic quest for knowledge that responds to his organismic needs. Kirschner, Sweller and Clark argued based on recent cognitive psychology findings that minimally guided instruction leads to an overload of working memory (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006), a conclusion rather at odds with Rogers' suppositions. Beyond issues of memory load, it is our experience that when the epistemological positions of the various disciplines are presented to a student out of context, they tend to feel a deep state of disconcert that they alleviate by clinging to standardized yet shallow measures of achievement such as grades. The monopoly of top-down standardized testing reinforces disempowerment (Leach, Neutze, & Zepke, 2010), even in curricula that claim to use SDL (Savin-Baden, 2004). In a world of higher education rife with aspirations to SDL, we see that young people, particularly in the West where such aspirations are the most prominent, feel politically disengaged (Pontes, Henn, & Griffiths, 2017), unhappy, stressed, worried about their job prospects (Winerman, 2017), while efforts to tackle urgent global challenges such as climate change and financial instability are stalling under the weight of isolationist, authoritarian tendencies in global politics. We submit that it is time for higher education to step away from the unfulfilled emancipatory promises of self-directed learning, and start engaging students in social transformative education. In the final section of this paper, we consider how this might play out with real students in real classrooms.

### ***Engaging students dialectically with pressing social challenges***

Social transformative education asks for a different positioning of students, teachers and societal partners such that one does not dominate or impose upon the other, but that they jointly learn about and change the conditions of society. Concretely, we advocate the use of problem-oriented, interdisciplinary, participant-directed education, most



often organised in the form of learning projects. Such a methodology can be traced back to Freire's call for problem-posing education and the specific methodology for Participatory Action Research that he developed in Chapter 3 of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1968/2000), but has been most thoroughly developed, implemented and researched in a higher education setting by the Danish reformed university of Roskilde (Andersen & Heilesen, 2014; Pedersen, 2008). Within this setting, the twin concepts of commitment and interdependency are crucial. Commitment implies that students are encouraged to address topics situated within their social context, thereby eschewing the academic ivory tower. In doing so, it is hoped that students will come to understand education not merely as a tool for personal development in the context of labour market skills, but primarily as the vehicle through which the societies of tomorrow are imagined. Such an imagining requires the transcendence of disciplinary imperatives, which can only be successfully achieved through problem-oriented education. The concept of interdependency accounts for the fact that social histories are constructed on the interpsychological plane. The individual learning alone is powerless to challenge the weight of the dominant culture and history as congealed in speech, but through the collective experience of project work, removed from professorial authority but guided by a facilitator, students and the social partners in their projects can come to grips with their own power to reshape meaning. As a group students will propose a social challenge they want to address. As a group, including teachers and societal partners, they will formulate their research problem in a way that challenges their student-centric view and opens up their minds to alternative perspectives. Within this educational setting, all parties participate as researchers – Freire called this the collaboration between the teacher-students and the student-teachers. Together they look into the social challenges and redefine the challenges as well as their solutions. This form of education is not only about 'what is', with all the subjectivity that this implies, but also about 'what could be', squarely opposed to the false neutrality of the 'banking' mode of education imposed from the teacher to the individual student. As the project goes on, students come to realize the possibilities and limits of their own knowledge as well as the possibilities and limits of the knowledge the other partners bring in. This where dialectics come in: the knowledge of one party is always positioned with regards to the knowledge other partners to the table, mediated through speech and symbols. From thereon existing knowledge can be combined beyond disciplines, challenged in its premises and meaning, and recreated and reframed until the whole group with all of its diverse parties agrees that they have addressed the collective problem. The resulting 'project report' is the drafted both for the purposed of collectively evaluating the students, and assisting the social partners in transforming their practices (sometimes two separate reports are drafted – one for an academic audience and the other for the social partners). Despite (perhaps because of?) the potential of problem-oriented project work for addressing social challenges, the implementation of such a pedagogical approach is quite often resisted by education managers, ministries of education and many teachers until either the approach is watered down such that the projects are no longer problem-oriented or dropped altogether (see the case of Roskilde: Hansen, 1997).



### ***Qualified teachers as the lynchpin of social transformation***

The use of problem-oriented project work might seem to neutralise the role of the teacher, as per the recommendations of Rogers. But rather, such an educational setting bestows upon the teacher a very special role – namely that of suggesting confronting ideas that force the students to consider new information in a holistic, interdisciplinary manner. This sort of input from the teacher was called ‘hinge-thematics’ by Freire, referring to the fact that the teacher’s input helps to articulate the student’s worldview into a broader picture. However, Freire was not specific as to what exactly the teacher should be expected to do – Vygotsky’s education approach is a lot more enlightening in this regard. The fact that speech is issued from the interpsychological plane means that students need assistance from more knowledgeable peers in order to process, and then challenge the meanings associated with the symbols presented to them in the educational setting. Without this help, they may simply be unable to let go of their preconceptions and certainties and will struggle to deconstruct their ideas through thematic dialogue. Thus, adding to what Freire suggested, a cultural-historical approach call upon teachers to tie new information, theories and practices into their historical context. The ability to confront students dialectically through hinge-thematics, to critically deconstruct and reconstruct historical narratives, to mediate thematic dialogue takes time and experience to acquire, and can only be nurtured if teachers are valued for the role that they play.

### ***Situating emancipation socially***

The appeal of SDL was in its emancipatory promise. We have shown that such a promise cannot be fulfilled by this approach, and have proposed social transformative education instead. We have suggested the potential impact of social transformative education on social challenges, but what of its emancipatory potential for students? At the end of the day, emancipation is not a purely collective event and must also imply autonomy of the individual. While offering emancipation without challenging the structural impediments to such does not work, neither does challenging structural issues without recognizing individual personhood. Personhood in social transformative education is recognised, valued and expressed in its contribution and participation to what ‘could be’. The small-group education setting offers the challenge of differing viewpoints that must converge towards collective solutions without suffocating personhood in a collective and uniform mass. At the small group level, facilitated by a competent teacher, students are challenged to become intellectually free within the socially and politically bound context that we all, as human, need to learn to navigate.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have challenged the emancipatory claims of self-directed learning, suggesting instead higher education can only become empowering for students, teachers and communities if it seeks to be social-transformative. Providing a philosophical framework around self-directed learning through an analysis of the work of Carl Rogers and the literature on self-directed learning has allowed us to understand why the concept is flawed from foundations onwards. Taking up the debate pitting Rogers against Freire in the

literature, we have complemented this with Vygotsky's take on the role of language in historical, cultural and social narratives. This has given us an avenue for exploring the potential of dialectic approaches to education through problem-oriented, project-based work. Although it is important to recognise the historical contribution of self-directed learning in challenging authoritarian modes of education, and to value some of the tools that it has produced (such as the student-teacher contract and the metrics by which to assess self-direction) the purpose of this paper was to issue a call to move away from self-directed learning, towards social-transformative education. We hope this has been achieved, but much now needs to be done to conceptually and empirically ground this into *praxis*.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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