An Argument for Strong Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT This article debates whether the concept of satisfaction as a measurement of quality in higher education supports the goal of enhancing transformative learning. As higher education is about transforming people, not just their knowledge, it is argued that learning challenges the identities of students, and even questions their personal integrity. Transformative learning is a painful process as well as a state of being that students have to accept and see as not only necessary but desired. Considerations of quality in higher education should therefore proceed from the goal of enhancing transformative learning based on the concept of 'strong learning'. A 'transformative learning identity' demands philosophically grounded pedagogics, not only about learning as a process but about the forces that shape and make learning possible in the first place. Strong learning—being such a learning philosophy—approaches learning as a social and processural phenomenon, where learning is made possible through a specific assemblage of social and processural conditions that force learning to be transformative through a continuous production of crisis.

Keywords: Learning; strong learning; transformative learning; evaluation

Introduction

Transformation is today presented as the raison d’être of higher education (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Horsburgh, 1999; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Popli, 2005). Not only must the personal identity of the student be transformed, higher education must transform itself to meet the demands of a new economy (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. vii). Everyone has an intuitive understanding of transformation, and this indicates both the strength and the weakness of the concept. Because of its familiarity, appeals to transformation help to foster discussion; but the word is used with very different connotations (see for instance Horsburgh, 1999; Popli, 2005). As a result, an important tension between the concept of transformation and the criteria we use to evaluate education has gone largely unnoticed. After all, when transformative learning is approached in evaluation and monitoring practices, we naturally begin to look for ‘indicators’ of transformation. Because ‘student satisfaction’ is a familiar indicator of educational quality, it has also become natural to evaluate learning by measuring whether or not students are satisfied with their transformation, that is, with what they have become. However, this immediately brings us up against a well-known

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dilemma: high scores on student satisfaction surveys are not directly correlated with academic achievement (Good & Brophy, 1986; Cope, 2003). Conceptualising transformation as a ‘fit’ between expectations and performance, that is, as a relevant locus of student satisfaction, is based on a contradiction in terms. If transformation has taken place, the expectations themselves must be interpreted in light of this transformation and this means that what is measured is not the correlation between ex ante expectations and ex post performance but something else. If transformation has not taken place there is nothing to measure, of course; but if transformation has taken place it will not be measured. The learning process has simply moved on.

In an attempt to move forward in this spirit, ‘strong learning’ is presented as a transformation of the learning problematic in higher education, developing this largely theoretical point on the basis of empirical observations of students in learning situations and a dialogue with four students. Strong learning approaches learning as a social and processual phenomenon, where learning is made possible through a specific assemblage of social and processual conditions that force learning to be transformative through a continuous production of crisis. Transformation is thus construed as the ontological condition of all learning, rather than its ultimate objective. At first glance this might seem to stretch the meaning of transformation quite a bit but we are, in fact, talking about a difference between transformation as an ontological condition and transformative learning as such. The label ‘transformative learning’ cannot be applied to all learning, but only to learning which has qualitatively transformed the learner or the problem or the subject matter. On this view, the learning problematic is not really about ‘transforming the student’; the student will always be transformed in learning processes. Rather, the problematic of ensuring quality in higher education is about how we can recognise transformation as transformative learning.

Satisfaction: a measurement of learning?

In a recent article in Quality in Higher Education, Sapna Popli (2005) adopts a marketing approach and presents a stakeholder perspective on quality enhancement of management education in India. A reading of this article will serve as catalyst to a discussion of the role ‘satisfaction’ has in quality management in higher education.

Popli argues that management education must prepare itself to incorporate present and future changes to a field that is witnessing intense transformation and growth. He describes management education today as being mainly oriented towards the delivery of information and teaching, and not sufficiently directed towards learning. The present system builds on an assumption that learning needs can be diagnosed a priori and can hence be taught by a teacher who has the correct answers to any imaginable question. This kind of educational thinking, says Popli, fits poorly with what he calls ‘the future demands of management education’ and describes it as a learning-oriented system with a keen focus on higher-order learning skills of students and the learning abilities of the educational institution itself. Popli makes a case for what might be called ‘transformative’ graduates, requiring a shift in the way education is approached, from informing towards learning. In order to overcome the shortcomings of the present educational system, Popli next presents the concept of ‘customer delight’—a way of measuring whether the student has created an emotional bond with the educational institution, which, he argues, will be necessary to ensure success, and which, in turn, is understood as the production of transformative graduates. To measure the needed areas of improvement you have to determine the degree of student satisfaction, which is now understood as a function of perceived performance and expectations.
‘Customer delight’ describes the situation where experience exceeds expectations and students are made to feel special. In marketing terms, satisfaction is an emotional bond with the brand and transformative learning, on this view, means increased customer loyalty.

The shift from the present to the future, which Popli asserts as necessary, seems to be not only a question of adding on extra features but rather a move from one educational paradigm to another. As many would agree, the teaching-based system has a set of basic assumptions about students and learning that differ from the (learning) system of the future. Learning will no longer come from the manipulation of the student as an object but will depend on a more active, experimental approach, where the student is an active part, exercising some degree of control in the learning process. One can say that the difference between Popli’s future and present systems lies in the determination of a constructive learning process. In the teaching-based system, a constructive learning process can be understood as students assimilating and memorising information. In the learning-based system, a constructive learning process is understood as the students being actively involved in transformative processes driven by problem solving. Just as Popli describes the ‘present system’ as one that is mainly concerned with what is delivered and perceived as needs today, satisfaction is determined by how close an experience meets or exceeds the expectations.

However, all this seems a bit peculiar. Popli sets out to examine quality proceeding from the assumptions governing ‘the present system’, that is, with a focus on the present day needs of the learners. The examination of the present system is governed by the assumptions of the present system, thus construing the future system as if this was governed by the same assumptions. How, then, is this supposed to make the system better able to transform itself into the future paradigm of learning? Further, the ‘future system’ seems to be not a system of the future but rather a paradigmatically different system, which is already today perceived as necessary (by Popli as well as most other researchers of higher education).

‘Need’ and ‘satisfaction’ are the most important concepts in Popli’s text. Whereas the concept of satisfaction is defined as a function of perceived performance and experience, the concept of need is assumed to be understood from the outset. A closer examination of Popli’s ‘future’ shows that the student is there construed as a customer, and as a customer the student is assumed to be able to ‘recognise a professional institute almost immediately from the manner in which the customer is dealt with’ (Popli, 2005, p. 17). When the professional institute deals professionally with the customer the needs of the customer are fulfilled. The customer’s needs are met through ‘effective pricing, communication and distribution to inform and serve the market’. To elaborate the argument, Popli identifies eight salient characteristics of the future educational systems: open and flexible systems, direct and easy access to every learner, a broadly based and futuristic visionary stream of learning, edutainment, infotainment, student-centred learning (emphasis on insight and knowledge rather than information collection), personal knowledge, need and utility-oriented learning (Popli, 2005). It is unclear how Popli arrives at exactly these eight characteristics as being the most important to be fulfilled by the educational system of tomorrow. It is clear, however, that Popli constructs the connection between student needs and educational design as a question of fit that is determined by the (positive) emotional effects this fit supposedly will have on students. Most importantly, the fit between expectations and performance is to be measured through satisfaction surveys, translating and measuring the eight characteristics through variables of customer satisfaction: perceptions about the learning and teaching, learning support facilities, learning environment, other support facilities and external aspects of being a student. Quite reasonably, the factors explored must be understood as needs but it seems rather arbitrary to pick out these eight characteristics and
call them needs. Needs in what sense? Does the term ‘need’ apply to factors necessary for learning to take place or is ‘need’ to be understood as factors that are nice to have if the learning situation is to be more comfortable?

Comfortable environments are generally seen as having an indirect impact on learning (Horsburgh, 1999; Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002) but it is difficult to determine the precise nature of this impact and uncertain whether it produces transformative learning. There is some evidence that satisfied student populations have lower drop-out rates (Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002), while other studies report that a productive learning atmosphere should be satisfying but not too pleasant or unrestrained (Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002). Satisfaction, it seems, cannot be relied upon to measure learning. It may, on the contrary, turn out to be an indicator of complacency. Wiers-Jenssen et al. specify that an appeal to consumer satisfaction has a tendency to impose a distinction within higher education between the employable and educational benefits of earning a degree.

A paradigmatic shift: transformation as ontological condition for learning

The analysis of Popli’s article highlights the dilemma between the process necessary to produce transformative candidates, and the focus on accountability and transactional learning, which is a much more abrupt and structural form of evaluation. These two perspectives on quality in higher education have been called ‘quality-as-accountability’ and ‘quality-as-transformation’ (Harvey & Knight, 1996). In the first case, the logic is economic and rationalistic, where the main concern is to optimise the component parts of education as transaction; in the second case, the logic is pedagogical and developmental, where the main concern is the involvement and development of students in (transformative) learning processes.

According to the accountability strand of the debate, in which Popli obviously participates, universities must be concerned with student flows and numbers of candidates produced to secure continued income and hence survival (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Tan & Kek, 2004; Popli, 2005). The student is seen as a consumer of education and student satisfaction becomes an important indicator to secure not only quality but ultimately also survival. While Popli remains firmly committed to the accountability line, he opens the door to the competing view by pointing out that transformative learning must be ensured in the quest for quality.

The transformative strand of the debate is much more radical on this point. Universities, it is argued, must be concerned with transformative learning and education, which is then seen as a process where students are active participants; not consumers, users or clients, as Popli insists. ‘Education is not a service for a customer (much less a product to be consumed) but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant’ (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 7). Learning, transformation and professional skills are in focus, and the main concerns of the university are to maintain high professional standards.

The two logics divide discussions of the evaluation of quality in higher education into accountability versus transformative-based considerations. Horsburgh (1999), for example, argues that for quality monitoring to be effective it must have a more keen focus on student learning processes and teachers practices. Popli, appealing to accountability-oriented considerations, argues that institutions ‘achieve their goals by offering and exchanging values with various markets and publics’. There seems to be a top-heaviness in accountability approaches, aptly noted by Harvey and Newton (2004): it is ‘a bit like evaluating the quality of a football match for spectators by examining the stadium, the pitch, the team sheet and the credentials of the coach’.
The debates meet and are obscured when the concept of ‘transformative learning’ is introduced. Transformative learning requires a transformation of the person, not simply of the understanding of a domain. This directed process is understood by Horsburgh as a process towards certain learner characteristics highlighting changeability of the learner as well as the learner’s mastery of the environment as undergoing change (Horsburgh, 1999). And this is where the need for a paradigm shift shows itself. The question of transformative learning is reflected back to the individual as if transformative learning could be separated from its contextual embeddedness. If movement and transformation is the basic argument for the need for transformative learning it must mean that transformation already exists inside the learning process: learning is a transformative process. If learning is a transformative process in itself the question of ensuring transformative learning becomes not so much a question of creating transformation but rather a question of managing transformation.

The discussion of learning and satisfaction seems to be interesting only if transformation is seen as something to be added to the process of learning, and learning and satisfaction are two distinctly different output variables and not mutually explanatory. That is to say that learning may not be an effect of satisfaction or vice versa; satisfaction is another, inherently different, affectation, which institutions need to produce in students because educational institutions exist in a market economy.

**Strong learning as a social and processual phenomenon**

Transformative learning can be seen as a form of higher-order learning of which different terminologies are used, including double-loop, deutero-learning, accommodative learning, deep learning, generative learning. Higher-order forms of learning are generally understood as having the capacity to change or redefine individuals ‘mental models’. Mental models are commonly understood as deeply ingrained assumptions, generalisations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action. In this way, mental models support a constructivist notion of learning that argues that learners will not learn the same things from the same lessons, because starting points and the existing ways of analysing data differ from person to person and sometimes also from context to context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A mental model, then, represents or simplifies an individual’s view of the world (Cope, 2003). It imbues experience with meaning; it shapes a world.

Nietzsche argued that meaning is a hierarchical relation of forces; some are acting and some are reacting in a complex and hierarchical whole (Nietzsche, 1969, 1990, 1994). This means, that when humans create meaning, two kinds of forces are at play: the primary forces, which are transformative, and the secondary forces which are adaptive (Deleuze, 2002). These forces are related to each other and according to Nietzsche this relation is ‘will’. The will should not be understood as that which the will wants, but that which—in Nietzsche’s terms—‘wants in the will’. This concept means that the will of an individual is socially constructed, and that the intentions of a person are more or less determined by the person’s habitus and the actual social context. The forces can therefore not be understood as individual forces of a specific human being but as forces that are, so to speak, creating the humanness of the human. To professionals acquainted with learning theory, Nietzsche’s forces seem quite similar to the well-known assimilative and accommodative processes of learning put forth by Piaget and elaborated by Harvey and Knight (1996). But Nietzsche would not differentiate assimilative learning as surface learning and accommodative learning as deep learning. Both kinds of learning are necessary. There can be no learning in a strong sense
without an authoritative demand of a domain to be mastered; but the approach to that mastering must cover both adaptive and transformative moves. Assimilation and accommodation are not seen as mutually exclusive or in conflict. Rather, assimilation is necessary for accommodation to happen in the first place. It is important to note that the learning ‘force’, to use Nietzsche’s term (Kraft), is exerted on the inside and on the outside at the same time; that is, it can neither be understood as an individual skill held by an actor or an organisational structure. Rather, it is a question of the specific assemblage of human organisation understood processually (Cooper, 1998, 2005, 2007).

The relation between actor and structure has, of course, been debated in great depth (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Bourdieu, 1997; Wenger, 1998; Rose, 1999; Baumann, 2001; Bramming, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The point of contention is how actor and structure are conceptualised. Are actor and structure to be seen as two independent but related entities, or are they internally interrelated and mutually dependent? In the following the relation between actor and structure is conceptualised as a social movement where the learning practices are not an aggregation of individual experiences but a field of relations—a relationality (Cooper, 2005). This is an important shift of perspective because it allows learning to transcend the individual and the organisation grasping learning as a social and continuous phenomenon. The individual does not become individual by an act of will but through living a social life, being a social being (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). A shift in perspective towards relationality thus makes it possible to grasp the provisional, processual character of transformative learning; the interrelatedness and mutuality of individual and socius is manifest as an emergent phenomenon, which is always unfinished, that is to say, in continuous movement. On this view, the process of learning is a simultaneous disintegrative and creative movement (Cooper, 1998, 2005, 2007). Such a meta-perspective grounded in an ontology of transformation must be the prerequisite if we are to talk about transformative learning. Students are attaining and shaping an identity of being students by living the life of students but, paradoxically, they do so while being always on the move, always becoming something else. It is a process of disintegration and emergence, the student becoming the ‘employee’ or the ‘academic’, but in any case no longer the student.

Strong learning makes transformation an ontological condition of learning, which means that all learning will foster change but not all these changes can be labelled ‘transformative’. Strong learning, therefore, establishes the point of departure for recognising transformative learning as a processual phenomenon rather than a set of individual characteristics. It changes the object of management from the inside of the student towards the handling of social processes.

**Forces towards transformative learning**

The following discussion is illustrated with a relatively consistent set of observations of students over the last 10 years. These observations first of all changed the preliminary, subjective hypotheses regarding the subject, and could therefore be used to open the research object to investigation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992); second, they allowed a more clear articulation of the research object: the transformation of students. Working from an analytical constructivist perspective (Andersen, 2003), this provisional articulation of the object was elaborated with open focus group interviews (Templeton, 1994) involving a group of students who had followed a masters level course applying a radical, participatory pedagogy at the Copenhagen Business School. The interview, lasting 4 hours, was taped with the
consent of the students and was transcribed. The interview is biased in the way that the interviewer had been partly involved in the course, and knew the students from their introductory courses. However, this knowledge also enabled the interviewer to have a dialogue with the students taking in their learning histories and understanding their comments contextually. From the chosen quotations it should be obvious, that the students where not inhibited by the interviewer.

Very often students appear frustrated, irritated and even annoyed, especially in the first period of a new learning experience. They will nag and complain if they do not understand, they will feel that even the smallest discrepancy between teachers is of utmost importance to their learning, they will be frustrated in class if they cannot be told exactly why they have to go through this or that. As time passes (often within a year) some students will change; even some of the most annoying or annoyed will change. They will be more personally relaxed, they will be fierce advocates of the learning processes they have been through and the educational milieu they have been part of, and they seem to be doing much better academically. Transformation has happened but can such a transformation be understood as ‘transformative learning’? The transformation raises a question regarding what had happened to the insecure students for whom academic study seemed inappropriate. Most surprisingly, it seems that even unsatisfied, and immediately ‘unsuited’ students have been transformed.

In short, students can have an emotional way of learning, being angry, frightened, unsatisfied etc., that is sometimes annoying, and often time-consuming, demanding a great deal of advice and coaching. These negative emotions which are not normally seen as signs of learning in quality efforts may turn out to be the most important signs of learning. From a strong learning approach frustration, anger and even outright dissatisfaction can be approached as displays of intense learning. As Harvey and Knight (1996, p. 133) put it, ‘transforming the person [is] not (simply!) about transforming their skills or domain of understanding’. The strong learning approach will argue that the students in question have been part of a social developmental process. They have changed and been changed but how does that make the learning transformative?

The specific assemblage of human organisation that Cooper admonishes us to understand can be conceptualised through a hypothetical but plausible example. Consider the situation of being in a class of final-year students, who have been given a reading assignment in advance of a class. The teacher quickly discovers how differently the class of 30 students have prepared. Two have read the texts thoroughly and have considered the questions they where asked to prepare. Seven students are somewhat prepared; they have read the texts and looked at the questions. Ten have familiarised themselves with the major themes of the readings but have made no serious effort to understand or critique them and the rest are just showing up for class with no preparation. This is a familiar dilemma for the teacher. What to do? Should the teacher structure the learning situation to suit the needs of the two or nine prepared students, or should the teacher set the bar lower in the hope of getting more students to participate actively in the class? Let us assume that the teacher has taken a course in practical pedagogy and has learned that if the bar is lowered more students will show up unprepared next time. So the teacher proceeds more-or-less as planned and enjoys an active learning experience with the prepared students. They feel that the teacher is talking with them (not just at them) in an empowering way and they enter the dialogue with eagerness and interest. They may have many questions and doubts but are airing these freely. They may be frustrated that they do not immediately understand some of the material but they are participating in the process of understanding it actively. After a
few minutes, however, a student (not one of the prepared ones) complains that the lecture or session is incomprehensible or too theoretical, that the expectations for preparation are unrealistic and that the teaching has become irrelevant. The strong learning forces are now in danger of being divided by negative, adaptive interference.

The ‘strong’ learning is transformative and ‘weak’ learning is adaptive. The transformativity of strong learning lies in the affirmative approach of active participating and responsibility for the learning process as a whole. It is a relation of forces where the actualised way the students approach learning is learned socially because lessons can be presented in both strong and weak representations and can, likewise, be met in a strong way or in a weak way. The quality of learning, then, is not to be seen as a function but as a relational field of active and reactive forces: it is an assemblage of social and processual conditions.

The remarks of one student reflects such an event:

I think you have to enter a higher plane than just ‘what does this exam mean to you? What is the good learning process?’ You have to ask your self, ‘Okay, what is the aim of seeking higher education?’ I think you have to see yourself as someone who is becoming ‘educated’: to become able to reflect on stuff, work with concepts—methods—learn methods and bring your thoughts out there where they mean something. We have often been talking with Professor X about this metaphor where as a teacher you just stand and shovel knowledge—pour it into the brain on those who are open—where I think as a teacher you have to focus on—and also as an educational institution—that the students have to understand that you are not coming here to be fed with answers and solutions, but to become educated—yes. Some of the stuff we have read in Course Y … we are becoming able to raise the right questions, at the right time; that is what you have to learn. But if you as a student all the time are just asking for answers then Course Z is great. (TT: 7; 5–38)

Strikingly the citation shows that the student in question obviously employs a distinctly ‘strong’ approach to the learning situation. It is clear that this student would also be able to extract learning from the course that is categorised as ‘teaching-oriented’ rather than ‘learning-oriented’ because the student is not only taking into account the content of the course but also, and more importantly, the learning process and the ultimate goals of being in the educational system. It becomes clear, in the quote, that for the student in question transformation is an overarching goal and effort. With Harvey and Knight (1996) we can point out that the need not is for transformative learning to take place per se, but that some kinds of transformations are to be preferred. Harvey and Knight (1996, p. 123) explain that transformation ‘depends on discarding naïve views of the subject of study, for without a transformed view of what is being studied and why, thinking will be fatally limited’. The strong learning perspective will add to this that strong learning can be upheld if the overarching will to learning is infused with affirmative participation. The system as a whole has to have a strongly ‘in-cultured’ meta-reflection on how transformative learning is to be supported, so that students have the opportunity to be conditioned in the strong forces. From the point of view of the university it might be more relevant to distinguish between strong and weak learning situations, than between strong and weak learners, because the conditions of learning will affect the will to learn in a powerful way. Our student may find him or herself in the paradoxical situation of not being rewarded for transformative learning and, being aware of this, not displaying anything but what the teacher wants to hear. However, strong learning forces make the student value the learning experience over the grades:
If we compare exam situations and learning outcome we could take the exam on ‘Knowledge sharing’ and the study circle in Course Y. I feel that in the Course Z exam I was more nervous because I was supposed to copy something from someone else’s thoughts. I didn’t ask myself what that thought was able to do; I was more focused on ‘am I able to remember exactly what he meant, when he said this’, contra the exam we had in Course Y, where we were asked, ‘What are you able to do with this kind of thinking?’ In that context we created—perhaps in many ways—our own forum for what stuff meant when you are activating this and that and I think the exam was more productive. But the learning process was also more productive because it was not a copying of others thoughts but exactly a ‘building on’ and a questioning of what the concepts were able to do in a practice.

(J:6; 9–28)

The student displaying this active learning approach does not take grades to necessarily measure the extent of (transformative) learning but rather displays how the cause and effect relation between taught and learned is constructed by the teacher. That is to say, that the student might be a transformative learner even though the teaching is transactional and maybe vice versa: that transformative teaching might in time force transactional students to learn transformatively. With Nietzsche’s concept of strong and weak forces in mind, it is suggested that the reason for this perplexing situation is that the student has been transformed by strong learning forces. The student is approaching the learning situation in a distinct way affirming the differences: the student is acting in the contexts of learning he or she is placed in, not reacting directly to learning stimuli. The student is not placing him or herself as a ‘consumer of learning opportunities’, the student has attained the identity of a strong learner, which places the student outside the debate of quality monitoring. The lesson to be learned is for the higher educational institution. Obviously the students can ‘survive’ some weak teaching processes, but strong learning has to be ingrained in the overarching conditions of learning or be provided in intense settings where the student is moved.

Multiplication of crisis: or satisfaction revisited

Is satisfaction a prerequisite to transformative learning or are learning and satisfaction two different output variables? The discussion above strongly points in the direction that transformative learning per se fosters and demands dilemmas, uncertainty, doubt and crisis. Asking whether students are satisfied in the midst of a frustrating learning process will not give valid answers; second, it might distort the corrective measures of teachers towards a more short-sighted ‘edutainment’ approach and, third, it does not capture the transformative, ontological forces at play.

Nietzsche provocatively formulates the relation between strong and weak learning as an opposite relation. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the weak forces conquer the strong; this is because the weak forces ‘separate the strong from what they can do’ (Deleuze, 2002, p. 75). The weak forces are victorious because they negate and hence thwart the strong forces by instigating a reactive mode of learning which we saw as a possibility in the case story above. Fostering strong learning means challenging the learner. Shocks, jolts or crises are not only necessary for new higher-level learning and re-adaptation to take place (Cope, 2003) but such shocks and jolts unsettle the balance and challenges the student as a person on an existential level. Or in the words of a student:
That session is burned into my mind! I remember it was the first time where I glimpsed what kind of frames I keep moving in and try to interpret every thing according to. And he—maybe I stress it too much—it was as if it smashed the entire universe in one go. Everything I had learned in grade school and later in high school: you have to think like that here and be rational there. It was smashed and I was just sitting there thinking—ok—now what. Then you run around in a fog for a while and hopefully to return, but that is how it is ... (…) (ironically) I should have taken the other pill[1] ... (TT:31: 8)

This student is obviously able to relate to the concept of transformative learning as a personal makeover: a new paradigm of being in learning, which is not altogether a pleasant experience but nonetheless totally irreversible. The transformation towards strong learning is seen as much more challenging, existentially demanding: a loss of innocence and an impossibility of returning to the simple state of learning. We have moved beyond learning as a mechanism, beyond accommodation and assimilation, and are now talking about learning as a mode of being in learning, which is not something the student has arrived at by free will. It is an active force not entirely under individual control; it is a social setup working behind the backs of the students and sneaking up as an inescapable transformation.

... you have to be able to handle the crisis and there is ... yes frustrations are all right but there has to be some frames. What I mean is that the mentor or guide or supervisor steps in and says: ‘you are getting lost—your level of frustration is too high—let me help you a bit.’ Lead without directly leading, I mean. (J: 35; 7)

It is not just the learner who has to be transformed it is the process of learning, where the ‘what’ is itself a question of transformation because to be ‘learned’ it must be transformed. Nothing can ever be ‘copied’—understanding is a transformative process and grasping this process as a process of adaptation, copying or appropriating knowledge as essence is a misconception of the process. Being in this transformative process the students must be helped to cope with crisis and frustration because frustration is easily accomplished but is, of course, not a learning goal in itself (Deleuze, 2002; Cope, 2003). Without a goal, a passion to burn for, transformation might become frustration and nothing else.

To make a difference learning-wise it has to become an apple of your eye: you have to become involved and you have to be a bit frustrated too. (T:34; 33)

Coping with frustration is not a question of being transformed but a letting go; and in this letting go a good measure of trust is needed. ‘It is all about letting your thoughts get fucked up,’ one student says, adding:

That of course demands that the supervisors or teachers are competent and, I think, master their field ... (J:8; 8).

The relationality of transformative learning balances its potential frustrations. Therefore, we must be become able to recognise, create and support frustration in our working towards transformative learning. We have to master both the actualised signs of learning, and the learning potentialities of our possible field of learning. We have to master both the foreground and the background of the learning experience (Cooper, 2007).
Conclusion and implications

Introducing strong learning to the debates on quality in higher education has as a first consequence that the possibility of evaluation is suspended. If transformation is an ontological condition of being it becomes rather arbitrary to pinpoint specific transformations of specific students at specific points in time. The ontological perspective presented in the beginning of the article makes transformation an inevitable condition of life—the earthquake never stops—so to speak.\[2\] Strong learning moves the perspective from an individual and rational accountability logic to a social and constructivist transformative logic and this means that the conditions for actualising transformation come into focus when talking about quality as an enhancement and deliberate management of the exact ways in which transformation can become actualised. Transformation becomes the basic ontological condition of learning, which means that the problem of quality is a problem of recognising transformation as transformative learning. Strong learning is presented as a way to make this process possible.

Strong learning presents an overarching alternative to the two dominant logics, namely, the logic of accountability and the logic of transformation. The student is neither constructed as consumer or an entity under transformation but is seen as a nexus of learning in a process of crisis. Learning is already happening and this process must be attached to some kind of crisis because the student’s world-view must be contested for transformative learning in the strong sense to take place.

The concerns of the university are themselves transformed by the forces of strong learning. The roads to transformative learning have to be kept open, and that, in a sense, digs into the pedagogical principles asserted in teaching situations. This means that the institutions should not waver from high professional standards but should also be focused on the students’ own appropriation of the knowledge presented. It should be demanded that the students are not only repeating what is taught, but are actually transforming the knowledge and are working with how the knowledge can change problems, solutions and situations. The students have to be met in their process of crisis and empowered to cope with conflicting demands, creating their own learning agenda from where they can keep track of process.

The evaluation of learning is tightly bound to the notion of a meta-perspective on learning. The institution must foster an approach that protects strong learning, while it buys into the pedagogical and ideological principles of the educational efforts. Learning process studies, learning logs and reflexive panels all have their place in monitoring the learning process, but student satisfaction should never be used as indicator of educational quality on a short-term basis. A strong learning approach turns our attention towards both the pedagogical ideologies of our institutions and, more importantly, on our pedagogical practices. Though the individual transformation of the learner remains important, the institutional approach towards creating processes and milieus of enabling strong learning must be seen as a prerequisite. Thus the management of teaching processes, pedagogical training of teachers and processual, qualitative evaluation and dialogue must be in focus.

Notes

[1] The student is referring to the movie *The Matrix*. Its protagonist is offered a choice between a red pill and a blue pill. The first will open his mind to way the world really is, the second will allow return him to his habitual (false) conception of the world. This is the source of the now common phrase ‘I should
have taken the blue pill’ to express ironic regret over becoming aware of the truth. It is here corrupted slightly as ‘the other pill’.

[2] I want to thank the anonymous reviewer who suggested this very fitting metaphor.

References


