

# OPPORTUNITIES OF TRANSFORMATIVE STUDENT LEARNING – THE CASE OF THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME

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**Abstract.** *This article indicates that university-based mobility programmes enable communication between students and academics from different countries, creating potentially favourable circumstances to distance themselves from the hitherto-accepted habits and, as a result, can lead to transformative learning. The theoretical basis is J. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. The results of research conducted among the students participating in the Erasmus+ programme are analyzed. A survey questionnaire was used to assess the changes in selected mental habits observed by the above-mentioned students. According to the collected data, more than half of the respondents reported strengthening as many as 13 out of the 16 listed mental habits.*

**Keywords:** *academic mobility, Erasmus+, higher education pedagogy, transformative learning.*

## Introduction

Challenges that young people have to face in the contemporary world, particularly when operating in globalised communities or in the continuously evolving labour market, provoke questions concerning education and efficiency of activities undertaken within its boundaries. It is formal education that is committed to prepare subsequent generations to meet those challenges. Therefore, the questions that continue to be asked concern the extent to which, through organized learning processes, we are able to help new generations to find fulfilment in this world and how to organize processes to make it possible for school and university graduates to acquire competences to enable them to successfully manage the surrounding world. Representatives of the World Economic Forum, debating in January 2018 in Davos, clearly specified that directions in education for further generations should change. As the director of London School of Economics, Minouche Shafik, pointed out, "Anything that is routine or repetitive will be automated" (website: Business Insider Polska, Kariera, January 2018). Conclusively, it will prove entirely inefficient, even in the nearest future, to prepare young people to function according to the schemes developed by communities. The importance will be placed on creativity and

reflection, which help to go beyond strict behavioural frameworks and to undertake activities in those fields where machines are not able to replace human beings. In this context, Jack Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning seems to provide an interesting method to analyse learning processes, as it emphasizes the possibilities for adults to take part in educational processes which go beyond formative educational frameworks based on the introduction of specific schemas and behavioural patterns. This may provide an incentive to search for new solutions within the higher education didactics. The starting point in this study is a preliminary analysis of changes occurring in the area of mental habits, one of the key categories in Mezirow's concept, which are revealed as the effect of experiences resulting from participation in the Erasmus+ student mobility programme. The aim of the conducted pilot studies is to provide data demonstrating the validity of explorations carried out in this direction and to facilitate determination of areas requiring deeper investigations. This paper, apart from the pilot study results, also presents an introduction to Mezirow's theory and issues concerning mobile students.

### **Mobile students' opportunities to learn**

The essence of transformative learning lies in a readiness to question the premises that so far have provided the main point of reference for interpreting and understanding the world, which consequently leads to personal development of a human being. Such readiness typically emerges in situations that, to some extent, destabilize previous behavioural schemes and destroy the safe network of relations developed for years (Pleskot-Makulska, 2007). The transformative learning theory, proposed by Jack Mezirow (1991), helps to follow those human development processes, which exceed the formative frameworks of shaping specific patterns, views or behavioural schemas. These processes, apart from automatically and uncritically adopting ways of thinking and behaving from other people, display a need to emancipate students from those unreflective behavioural patterns. This is related to the change concerning the manner in which meaning is given to the reality surrounding the human being and to basing all activities on conscious, critical reflection (Pleskot-Makulska, 2007). Experiences are crucial for the learning process, along with the methods applied to interpret those experiences and to give them meaning (Mezirow, 1991). From the perspective of examining learning opportunities for students, as a group of young people<sup>1</sup>, it is worth focusing on several basic analytical categories emerging from Mezirow's theory. A starting point related to learning is the frame of reference category.

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<sup>1</sup>Students belong to the "young adults" category, described by R. J. Havighurst as ranging from 18 to 25-30 years of life (Strelau, 2003).

Frames of reference are the structures of culture and language, through which we construct meanings (understood as making sense), giving coherence (understood as importance) to our experiences (Mezirow, 2009). In other words, a frame of reference is made of assumptions and various types of expectations of man, through which he filters and interprets the world surrounding him. On one hand, a frame of reference establishes boundaries for understanding reality and helps man to function in the world while, on the other, it reflects the barriers inherent to man and his surroundings. Therefore, it reduces the possibilities of operating in a manner that differs from the one assumed so far (Pleskot-Makulska, 2007). Mezirow distinguished two dimensions of the frame of reference, namely, habits of mind and points of view. The former mean the assumed and strengthened ways of thinking about something, of feeling or acting. Since they are deeply rooted in human subconsciousness, the changes occur in them very rarely. In turn, points of view are specific demonstrations of our habits of mind. These can be judgements, feelings or attitudes towards a specific situation or a person and they are also less permanent than habits of mind (Mezirow, 2009). A change, which is a central category in Mezirow's theory, is referred to as reframing within an individual frame of reference, and is built on the ability of man to change himself and to transform his previous schemes of thinking and acting as a result of new experiences. At this point, another category emerges, important from the point of view of students' learning analysis, referred to as a disorienting dilemma. It occurs in a situation evoking tension and anxiety, and causes a rift between the previous ways of understanding the world and the new needs. Hitherto-understanding of the world is supplemented with new experiences in which the student tries to understand, by imposing new interpretations on them by critical reflection of assumptions (Mezirow, 2009). It is worth emphasizing that the process of transformative learning takes place in communication between people, where the intentions, values and feelings of another person are being understood (Mezirow, 1998). Therefore, a question emerges of how to create situations that fit the definition of a disorienting dilemma in Mezirow's understanding (Pleskot-Makulska, 2007). It seems that higher education institutions provide particular opportunities to generate activities that promote going beyond the formative aspects of learning. Those unquestionably include mobility programmes, which enable communication between students and academics from different countries, creating potentially favourable circumstances to gain distance towards the habits adopted so far. In effect, this can lead to transformative learning. The history of universities demonstrates that mobility was the idea underlying the establishment of the academic community and, from the very beginning, their activities were of

an international nature<sup>2</sup>. Currently, the mobility of students and academics is one of the key principles of the Bologna reform and one of the basic elements of the European Area of Higher Education (Szymańska, 2009). The most popular mobility program is undoubtedly Erasmus+, which provides students with an opportunity to go abroad for a part of their studies or to take job placements, e.g. in cultural centres, museums, law firms, non-government organizations or enterprises in a selected partner state, while academics can deliver lectures or undergo training in partner institutions (Szymańska, 2009). Erasmus+ promotes the development of horizontal mobility, which consists in completing a part of the first or second degree studies in another university, in the same country or abroad (Szymańska, 2009). Participation in the horizontal mobility programme by the student at the stage of the first degree studies may become a factor determining his or her further mobility-related activity, and frequently contributes to the decision to pursue the second degree studies abroad (Erasmus Student Network, 2010). First experiences related to mobility very often encourage students; they also provide them with a huge load of experiences and contacts, which permanently change their future life, as well as their educational and professional paths. The programmes funded by the European Commission facilitate mobility and operate as a kind of assurance during the first stay abroad, both in financial and organizational terms. Students are provided with care by the partner institutions accepting them, through a network of institutional and faculty coordinators involved into the Erasmus+ programme, as well as the international association of students – Erasmus Student Network. Erasmus+ makes it possible to reduce the costs of academic exchange, but also promotes the building of partner relations between higher education centres, cooperation between universities and entrepreneurs, carrying out joint research, sharing experience and the application of modern IT technologies (Krajewski, 2004; Teichler, 2009; Dvir & Yemini, 2017). Students' mobility unquestionably affects their learning process, personal development and competence acquisition. However, there is no research demonstrating what really takes place in the area of personal development of a mobile student, particularly as regards “deeper” effects of mobility experiences in the sphere of personal development, such as possible changes to mental habits, patterns, attitudes or upheld values. The studies conducted so far rather concerned the effects of mobility on various levels of academic teaching and methods for enabling and facilitating students' mobility

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<sup>2</sup> The first university was founded in about 1088 in Bologna, northern Italy. Students and academics had the right to freely come to the town, were granted safety during their stay and freedom to teach Roman and canon law. Students arriving from a given country or a group of countries created associations of foreign students. Similar universities were soon established in Paris, Oxford and Cambridge. Universities quickly became study centres of international importance, often described as *studium generale*, i.e. general schools, with a European range. Young people, searching for knowledge, wandered through Europe from one university to another (Pedersen, 2000).

(Bridger, 2015). Studies and statistical analyses have also been conducted concerning the activities of Polish universities under the Erasmus programme, which describe their types, range and effects (Członkowska-Naumiuk, 2015). Additionally, the impact of the mobility of students carrying out a part of their studies or job placement abroad under the Erasmus programme on the improvement of their qualifications, employability or institutional development of higher education institutions were the subjects of examination. The importance of programme implementation for processes related to internationalization of higher education institutions is also being assessed (Brandenburg, 2014). Moreover, the results of analyses have been published concerning the impact of students' mobility on the quality of education in individual countries (Demange & Fenge, 2010). The above-mentioned studies only to a minor extent concern the personal development of students and their individual deep experiences related to mobility itself and to the establishment of intercultural contacts. Therefore, a need exists to explore this vast area concerning the significance of mobility for personal development of young people who undertake it.

### **Methodology note**

The research presented in this paper was based on pilot studies carried out on a group of 91 students participating in the Erasmus+ programme. Two research questions were posed: To what extent does international mobility of students trigger the transformative learning process and which new experiences are regarded by students as the most important in the context of the changes observed?

The research was conducted as a survey (Babbie, 2003). The data were collected based on a questionnaire prepared for the study. For specifying the content of the area of explorations, a set of significant mental habits developed by Costa and Kallick (2007) with direct reference to Mezirow's theory, proved useful. The above-mentioned authors named and described a group of 16 mental habits, which are developed in childhood and in adulthood are subject to more or less significant modifications, making up part of the personal development of a human being. This set forms the main matrix for the prepared research tool. Each of the mental habits included in this set was provided with several sentences of description, to specify its nature in more detail. The list of questionnaire items prepared in this way was used to determine the opinion of students with regard to the changes emerging in the area of specific mental habits – their reinforcement or weakening, or the fact that they stayed at the same level. Considering the structure of the research tool, we cannot describe the intensity of the changes declared, but only record the fact of their initiation as a result of mobility-related experiences and participation in educational activities abroad. It is worth remembering that for participation of students in international educational

exchange, the process of communication is based on foreign languages, which creates a specific area of experiences in this regard. In the two final questions, students were asked about their experiences from the mobility periods to which students attach the highest importance (an open question) and their effect on the changes observed (a semi-open multiple choice cafeteria question). All questions were formulated in the English language, knowledge of which is common among students participating in Erasmus+. Data were collected in both ways: through an auditorium questionnaire and an online survey. The respondents participating in the research came from 22 countries. Women, who accounted for 65 % of the surveyed students, made up the prevailing group, while men accounted for 35 %. Most students (77 %) in the examined group were participating in Erasmus+ for the first time. For other students, the number of mobility periods ranged from 2 to 5. The aim of the study presented is to describe to what extent mobility-related experiences create space for students' transformative learning.

### **Towards the change of mental habits among mobile students – pilot study results**

An analysis of students' opinion on mental habits, one of the key elements of Mezirow's theory, was used as the starting point in examining the possibilities of obtaining an insight into transformative learning processes resulting from mobility-related experiences. The search for areas within which students observed certain symptoms of changes related to new foreign experiences was based on a summary of their responses, in which they declared reinforcement of mental habits listed in the survey. Mental habits were arranged according to a rising share of students who recorded such changes, as presented in Figure 1.

The data obtained demonstrate that a review of mental habits made by students results in a belief shared by a significant group of the surveyed concerning the emergence of positive symptoms of a change in various areas. For each feature, a certain share of persons observed its reinforcement, which ranged from almost 35 % of respondents observing "reinforcement of striving for accuracy", to over 81 % observing "reinforcement of thinking flexibility" (Figure 1). More than half of the surveyed recorded reinforcement of the described features for 13 out of 16 mental habits listed. Such a broad scope of changes felt by the students can prove the significant developmental potential of mobility experiences, related to relocation not only in geographical terms, but also in cultural, language or educational aspects. Facing the "new" provides conditions promoting exploration of basic assumptions of one's own behaviour. In view of similar numbers of students indicating reinforcements of individual mental habits, four groups, showing certain tendencies reflected in the transformative learning process, were determined for the purposes of the analysis. These are the groups

of habits related to learning in new situations (group 1), interpersonal relations and communication (group 2), triggering reflections over one’s own actions (group 3) and the purposeful planning of one’s own attempts (group 4).



Figure 1. Choices of students indicating reinforcement of features in specific mental habit areas – data expressed in %, source: own research

The first group includes four mental habits indicated by more than 70 % students in the examined group: thinking flexibility, applying past knowledge to new situations, remaining open to continuous learning and the ability to take reasonable risks. The need to trigger these references results from the specific nature of learning in new situations, in which first of all reserves of past knowledge are used, processed later on in various ways, which provides a feeling of security and control of the situation. The habits included in this group seem to be fundamental for solving problems related to everyday existence in a new place and culture, therefore almost all students quite frequently had to return to them or work on them.

The second group includes habits whose reinforcement was claimed by 69.2 % to 62.2 % of the survey, namely: listening with understanding and empathy, striving towards thinking and communicating with clarity and precision, creative thinking, innovativeness, managing one’s own impulsivity, thinking towards cooperation, sense of humour. This group clearly demonstrates aspects

related to interpersonal relations, communication and orientation towards cooperation, which significantly condition the transformative learning progress. This group of habits is related to communicative learning, i.e. voluntary and full participation in a dialectic discourse with other people, in order to arrive at new, more reasonable judgements, more adequate for a new situation (Mezirow, 2009).

The third set of habits, in the area of which observable symptoms were confirmed by 55.6 % to 51.6 % of students, include: responding to the world with wonderment and awe, meta-cognition and data gathering through all senses. Here, in turn, the emergence of the next, deeper state of change, based on triggering the reflections over one's own existence and action, can be observed. This is a group of habits related to critical self-reflection over the assumptions – a critical judgement of sources, nature and consequence of mental habits – our own, but also of other people. In the further stage, this is transformed into a more general, constant disposition to critically reflect upon one's own assumptions and the assumptions of other people, to search for justification of one's own transformative insights through participation in the discourse and to behave in life according to this new “evolved” way of perceiving things (Mezirow 2009). Since these are deep changes requiring a high level of reflection, they are not experienced by all students.

The fourth group is made up of mental habits whose reinforcement was declared by the lowest share of students (between 42.9 % and 35.2 %). These are: persistence in striving to reach goals, questioning and posing questions, and striving for accuracy. Here, the dimension of subjective, conscious and purposeful construction and achievement of one's aims can be observed, along with planning activities and striving towards their full and precise implementation. A low score obtained in the area of reinforcement concerning these features can suggest that accuracy, which is particularly important in formal education, ceases to be the priority in dynamically changing conditions, which additionally require communication in various languages with people originating from different cultural frames of reference. In colloquial terms – it is more important to make oneself understood and solve a problem than to preserve a high level of precision in one's utterance or perfect quality of solutions developed.

The study also attempted to describe areas of experiences, which in the students' opinion could contribute to triggering the changes, which they observed. In the first of the questions, respondents were asked to choose the three most important experiences out of the thirteen listed; in the second question, they were invited to present their own opinion on this subject (an open question). The data obtained in response to the first question make it possible to distinguish two main areas of significant experiences. The first one is related to requirements the students had to face by functioning in a different culture and new situations. The following experiences are mentioned as particularly inspiring: observation of

relationships between people in the host country – 62.9 % of the responses, and the need to adjust to the standards (e.g. law, cultural) in this country – 44 % of the responses. For almost one-third of students it is important to independently cope with new situations – 32.6 % of the responses, which is often accompanied by observation of other people and their way of handling difficult situations – 24.7 % of the responses. The second area is related to educational experiences, differing from the hitherto known mode of learning. Different ways of teaching or methods used in the host institutions are indicated by 41.6 % of the respondents. Every fourth student also attaches great importance to his or her contacts with peers from other countries at the university (28.1 % response rate) and close relations with lecturers at the host institutions (24.7 % response rate). The statements of Erasmus+ participants provided as an answer to an open question are primarily focused on the first area of experiences. Students most frequently mention the importance of meeting new people and their cultures (attitudes, opinions) and learning how to live in a different culture (52.6 % response rate). Changes emerging in the perception of the world are also related to travel and related to unpredictable situations (the need to manage time or money), which force them to take responsibility for themselves, and to be involved in unaided and autonomous activities (24.4 % response rate). In addition, learning the language is an important element of the mobility period for every fifth person (20.5 % response rate). Those statements clearly correspond to previously discussed areas of reinforced features describing mental habits and, in particular, to the two most clearly identified groups related to learning in new situations and to anchoring this process to interpersonal relations and communication.

### **New horizons**

The results of pilot studies presented in the paper do not provide the grounds for drawing clear conclusions. However, they make interesting material for constructing further research projects concerning the possibilities of evoking/initiating transformative learning processes among students. On one hand, they confirmed the results of the research presented, e.g. in the “2011 Eurobarometer - Youth on the Move” report (Gallup Organization, 2011), indicating that acknowledge of foreign languages, increased awareness of other cultures and higher adaptability are the main benefits of staying abroad mentioned by students themselves. They also demonstrated that exploration of broadly understood education of young adults in the context of J. Mezirow’s theory is very promising. The next stage of research would require the application of qualitative strategies, which could provide answers to the question about specific situations or experiences that trigger an effect of changes to mental habits (both in terms of their weakening and reinforcement), the way in which the environment affects the

development of habits and the extent to which the reinforced habits affect their functioning at work, at the university and in everyday life. The context of improving academic exchange would provide a point of reference particularly interesting to us, with a view towards increasing the effectiveness of transformative learning. A detailed examination of the sphere of mobile student experiences that act as an impulse for changes in mental habits may also provide a starting point for the search for educational experiences to ensure similar effects without the need to change the location where learning takes place. This may be tele-collaboration, which allows online intercultural exchange between international students' groups (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016).

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