

# **DON BOSCO'S EDUCATIVE SYSTEM: HARBINGER OF TODAY'S TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORIES**

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This paper intends to present Don Bosco (DB) as a creative educator of his times, and his Preventive System (PS) as an original lifestyle, which offers a pioneering set of educative principles and methodology. As an innovative Educator-Saint of the 1870s, his Preventive System can be reckoned as a ‘harbinger’ of what today’s educational scholars and researchers would term as ‘Transformative Learning’, a term popularized by Mezirow in 1970.

## **1. SITUATING DON BOSCO'S PREVENTIVE SYSTEM.**

Little Johnny Bosco, narrating his dream at the age of nine in the *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis De Sales from 1815 to 1855* writes: “Glancing around, I realised that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and other animals had taken their place. ‘This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children.’ I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs” (Bosco, 1985, 3-4).

That first dream set the course of his entire life. It told in symbolic form what was to be DB’s mission, namely, **to transform the young to be upright citizens and good Christians.**

“Don Bosco had already sacrificed his life for the education and instruction of the young for fifty years. The results of his work are so gratifying and so widespread that DB has become the *most famous educator of his times*, both in the old and in the new world. What has contributed to his fame is his *Preventive System*” (Giordani, 1886, 63, emphasis added).

The refreshing words of Fr. Duvallett, a French priest, co-worker of Abbe Pierre, an apostle for the education of youth says: “You have schools, oratories and youth centres but *only one treasure – the educational method of Don Bosco...* Change everything. Lose, if need be, your houses, but hold on to this treasure thus building in thousands of hearts a way of love and save youth, which is the heritage of Don Bosco” (Vigano, 1979, 24-25)

In the Preventive System, DB manifested a strong creative ability. His creativity involves “a creative synthesis which is a sign of genius, I call it creative synthesis because its originality, its beauty, its greatness does not reside so much in its novelty of particulars but in the discovery of that idea which binds them into a new synthesis and results into a whole” (Vigano, 1979, 13-14).

## **1.1. Don Bosco's Preventive System**

“*The Preventive System in the Education of the Young*” written by DB in 1877 (Salesian Constitutions, 2015, 250-257), unlike any scientific or scholarly treatise on education, consists of succinct statements of some of the educative principles he evolved from his personal experience with the young. The expression ‘preventive’ in opposition to ‘repressive’ aims at preventing the young from encountering negative or harmful experiences and emphasises the quest ‘to prevent rather than to heal’. Such a prevention is founded on enabling the young to understand the reasonableness of the request and loving persuasion that is realised through assistance and accompaniment. The term ‘system’ is to be understood, not in its primary meaning of a complete body of knowledge systematically evolved or stated, but as a concrete way of relating with the young based upon certain personal observations and convictions.

“Don Bosco has handed on to us his Preventive System as a means for carrying out our educational and pastoral service. This system is based entirely on reason, religion and loving kindness. Instead of constraint, it appeals to the resources of intelligence, love and the desire for God which everyone has in the depths of his being. It brings together educators and youngsters in a family experience of trust and dialogue. Imitating God’s patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom. We then accompany them, so that they may develop solid convictions and gradually assume the responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and as men of faith” (*Constitution*, 2015, 38).

DB’s Preventive System, in fact, does not merely refer to a written work but to the sum total of convictions, attitudes, actions, presence, means, methods and structures which have progressively established a certain personal and community manner of relating with the youth.

The Preventive System is to be situated between two signposts, that of *education* and *service*, which enlighten and guide the various undertakings in the diverse situations of time and space. The Preventive System calls for integration at two other levels or aspects that are different yet closely linked to one another: the *inspiring principle* which creates a spiritual attitude in the individual, and the *methodological principle* which serves as a guide in the concrete situation of the educator’s action. Furthermore, the Preventive System calls for amalgamation of the ‘*impetus of care and concern for the young*’ and the ‘*pedagogical impetus*’.

## **1.2. Quintessence of the Preventive System**

DB’s Preventive System arose and took shape in conceptual terms precisely through his direct, real and factual contact with the boys most at risk from the 1850s in Turin; and therefore, DB’s System was, very specifically, tailored to meet the needs of the young by its explicit option for the poorest of the young.

## **Predilection for the Young**

Don Bosco's pedagogy is a youth-oriented pedagogy where the terms 'young', 'youth' are given a rather wide connotation. Don Bosco believed that "in every youngster, even the most unfortunate one, there is a spot accessible to what is good. It is the task of an educator to look for this spot, the sensitive heart string, and draw profit from it" (Lemoyne, Vol. 5, 367). Don Bosco's System requires that the educator seek to recognize the innate positive qualities found in the young, while acknowledging the thoughtlessness of the young and their lack of experience. "For Don Bosco youth, taken in the widest sense, is by definition, 'dangerously inexperienced' and therefore 'unstable' and 'careless'" (Braido, 2013, 186).

Don Bosco's predilection for the young is clearly demonstrated in his affirmation: "For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life" (*Constitutions*, 14). Such a predilection for the young is embodied in the following convictions: God loves the young, God wants to offer fullness of life to the young, God's Spirit is present and active in the life of the young. For the welfare of the young DB gave generously of his time, talents and health.

DB's intentions, realized through the various types of institutions, were all focused on the young at risk and side-lined by society. In his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, DB writes: "The world will always welcome us as long as our concern is for under-privileged peoples, poor children, members of society most in danger. This is our real wealth which no one will envy and nobody will take from us" (Bosco, *Memoirs* 127). **Reason, the First of the Triad**

DB was always a keen follower of the educative methods of his times. He accepted worthy ideas of his days, adapted them and put his unique stamp to serve his educative purpose. Henri Gheon asserted: "He was, a century before his time" (Gheon H., 1951, 164). "Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness" is a synthetic expression of his educative project for the young.

"Reason", as one of the three core elements of the System, was not conceived chiefly in its philosophical implications but in its practical aspects. Since the term was nowhere defined by DB, we infer its genuine significance from the diverse contexts in which this term was used in his life. Reason and reasonableness are often employed as synonymous. Reason, in the mind of DB, was considered as the faculty and power of reasoning or the act and the fruit of reasoning. In every act of reasoning, conceptualization and judgement are evidently present. Reasonableness indicates a quality of the act of reasoning or the product of reasoning. Practical judgement, common sense, prudence, understanding, naturalness and moderation are some of the qualities of reasonableness in DB's system. Reason has the important function of convincing the educand of the need to follow truth and good in accordance with his intellectual development, needs and situation.

DB insisted on reasonableness or the capacity of the educator to adapt himself to the psychology of each educand. DB demanded reasonableness in religious practices, in loving kindness, in disciplinary rules. (Panampara, N.Y, 47-51; Morrison, 1999, 90-110).

Reason and reasonableness ask of the educator to motivate the young to consider the events of life and its developments and make a balanced judgement about them, by making good use of what is known about education; and thus, to stimulate responsibility through suggestions, keeping in mind the possibilities of the young.

### ***Religion, the Second of the Triad***

DB's pedagogy, in keeping with his predominantly Catholic context, lays a strong emphasis on "religion". DB was absolutely convinced that religion (read relationship to the Transcendent or spiritual), was essential to offer integral education. DB disliked every form of repressive religion imposed from outside and forcefully. DB's educative action was founded on his experience of the love of God which consequently gave rise to his ethical and religious concept of life, to a life of duty, to serious and personal commitment and of moral responsibility. DB would often observe: "I don't want you to abstain from evil for fear of being seen or found out by Don Bosco, but because you will be seen by God... and He will ask you for an account" (Lemoyne, vol. 7, 229).

For him, religion was intended to situate the educand in a spontaneous communion with God who is to be considered as a father, a guide and friend. DB was convinced that religion would become attractive to the young when they perceive its reasonableness and practice it spontaneously. DB stressed individual responsibility and accountability. His greatest concern was to fortify the life and the conscience of the young in the Absolute and the Truth, the only source of every happiness, coherence, direction and devotion to life and duty.

### ***Loving Kindness, the Third of the Triad***

"Loving Kindness", the supreme principle of the Preventive System facilitates the convergence of reason and religion. Loving Kindness, experienced in his own earlier life, becomes the distinctive characteristic of the Preventive System. 'Loving Kindness' demands on the part of the educator, a relationship of confidence with the young and love and affectionate collaboration between the educator and educand. DB's words, actions and writings regarding dealings with the young were impregnated with love. DB's Loving Kindness was deeply rooted in a love that "is patient, is kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things" (1 Cor 13: 4-7). It is such love that translates itself as reason and reasonableness on the part of the educator and confidence, friendship and spontaneous collaboration on the part of the educand. Such love is the font of the Preventive System of DB.

The educator's love for the educand needs to be sincere and devoid of all sentimentality and selfish motives. It is a holy love and seeks the good of the young and their spiritual and human development. It was such a love that made DB affirm: "That you are young is enough to make me love you very much" (Bosco, 1847, 7).

DB insisted that "an educator can always speak to them (young) in the language of the heart, not only during the time of their education but even afterwards... (The educator) can subsequently exercise a great influence over them and counsel them, advise and even correct them, whatever position they may occupy in the world later on" (*Constitutions*, 252).

This Loving Kindness, experienced because of Christ's Incarnation, is an expression of a creative educative relationship that fosters a familial relationship and creates an attitude which gives rise to interior security in the young, which suggests ideals to them and sustains their efforts to overcome weaknesses.

### ***Family Spirit***

Don Bosco was fully aware that education was also the consequence of the environment and what the young learn from society. He was an ardent promoter of educative structures that favoured a "family environment" which makes each one feel at home and at ease. Don Bosco ran the Oratory as a large family, and the young really felt as if they had never left their homes. The family atmosphere made each one acceptable and to share responsibility together.

The characteristics of this family environment are 'mutual affection', 'feeling welcomed', 'responsibility for the common good'. Authentic family spirit inspires relationships of mutual esteem and trust. Further, the family atmosphere is governed not so much by recourse to rules as by faith and the promptings of the heart.

The family spirit of DB was the hallmark of every educative enterprise of DB and inspired every moment of its life: work and prayer, meals and recreation, meetings and other encounters. The authentic family spirit manifested itself in the spirit of joy and cheerfulness which are indispensable for every form of education.

### ***Animating Presence***

Even a superficial reading of DB's life indicates that he educated the young through a genuine presence. Presence for DB meant love and authentic love is manifested through the presence among the young. DB was always in the midst of young people: "Here in your midst I feel completely at home, for me, living means being here with you" (Lemoyne, Vol. 4, 654) and DB insisted that the practice of the Preventive System demands willingness to be with the young.

Among the characteristics of Presence in the Preventive System are: a warm-hearted presence i.e., welcoming, friendly and loving, a presence that is physical, constant and active, a presence that is educative, based on moral and spiritual principles, a presence that is witness and preventive. A

caring and loving presence calls for a pastoral heart, sense, ability and creativity (Vecchi Juan, AGC, no. 354, 27-29). DB's educative style demands an "animating presence" (Assistance) that is an ensemble of lifestyles of life-awakening (giving), life-liberating or purifying, life-sustaining and life designing, each of which is a life-enriching process and method that contributes to life-transforming movement. The Preventive System necessitates an empathy with the young which is a "harmonious relationship with the young, liking what they like but without abandoning our adult role of educators" (GC 21, 13).

### ***Educative Pastoral Community***

DB did not use this terminology, but in practice he gathered collaborators who associated themselves intrinsically with his mission and contributed with their competences and resources.

What we have said so far pertains to the realization of the Preventive System from the perspective of the educand. It is the "Educative Pastoral Community" (EPC) that is called to live this Preventive System. The EPC involves young people and adults, parents and educators, in a family atmosphere, each one making their own specific contributions, so that it can become a living manifestation of communion and carry out the educative mission among the young. The Salesian Religious Community (SDBs) has the specific task of becoming the animating nucleus in respect of the Educative Community as a whole and of each of its members.

### ***Ultimate Goal***

The ultimate goal of the Preventive System is to form "Upright citizens and good Christians". In a multi-faith context like that of India, this single goal with two complementary aspects can be reinterpreted as: one directed to human advancement and the other to education to the Divine or Transcendent God. This education to the divine or Transcendent God ought to help the young "to discover and increase their ability of opening themselves up to God and to the proposition of faith; by helping them to distinguish what is true and authentic from what is false and deceptive; by accompanying the young on their path to a meeting of communion with God, using the good elements that already exist in their faith and their desires" (GC 23, 1990, 74).

### ***Holistic Transformative Agenda***

DB's Preventive System envisages a "holistic transformative agenda". Authentic educative activity ensures that the young have a home that welcomes (belonging), a prayer atmosphere that provides God experience (ultimate meaning of life), a school that prepares them for life (learning) and a playground where friends could meet and celebrate life with all its underpinnings.

To live this PS today is a challenge. It calls for a dynamic fidelity of the educator not just to do what DB did, but to do what DB would have done in our present day.

## **2. CENTRALITY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING TODAY IN THE EDUCATION OF PERSONS**

The educative efficacy identifies itself with fostering efficacy in learning, recognizing well the characteristic and peculiar issues of the human condition within the process of learning.

Learning is a fundamental process of human action that has fascinated many a thinker, from Platonic and Aristotelian times, and yet has eluded a standardized definition. The *foci* of learning can be broadly categorised as follows: (a) a quantitative increase in knowledge, the acquisition of information, (b) memorising or storing information that can be reproduced, (c) the possession of facts, skills and methods that can be retained and used when necessary, (d) making sense or abstracting meaning in which various parts are related to each other and to the world, (e) interpreting and understanding reality in a different way. The first three are less complex and involve processes that are mostly external. Instead, the last two pertain to the internal aspects of learning. (Ramsden, 2003,

26) Learning in the above categories involves both ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’.

Although there is no consensus as to the precise nature of learning, the following description by Schunk is generally accepted as valid and functional. “Learning is an enduring change in behaviour or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience” (Schunk, 2004, 2).

Insisting that it is the person – the whole person, that is body/brain and mind who learns, Peter Jarvis defines learning as: “The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into an individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person” (Jarvis, 2009, 25).

An attentive analysis of learning evidences four possible process metaphors: Learning as transmission, construction, participation and transaction. The learning metaphors of *transmission* and *participation* appear to underscore the dichotomy between the *individual* and *social* dimensions. Instead, the metaphors of *construction* and *transaction* accentuate the contrast between the individual and the context. But in reality, these four metaphors outline a progressive evolution towards a greater heuristic complexity of the learning process (Ligorio, 2003, 11-26).

### **2.1. Transformative Learning Theories**

The sheer volume of literature on transformative learning theories prevents us from entering into all the details of the manifold theories and models.

The Transformative Learning theory of Mezirow (1991, 2000) originates from Dewey (1933, 1938) on experience; from Piaget (1966, 1972) and Kegan (1982) on cognitive structures and higher order thinking skills; from Maslow (1968) on self-actualization; from Vygotsky (1978) on social interaction; from Bruner (1996) on meaning-making and Habermas (1984, 1987) on discourse and critical theory perspective.

Transformative Learning is defined as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2009, 22). Unlike Informational Learning that is concerned with the development of knowledge and skills or “changes in *what* we know” (Kegan, 2000, 50), Transformative learning is about “changes in *how* we know” (Kegan, 2000, 50); it is concerned about reconstructing the framework and expanding the capacity for talking in and making sense of information.

Transformative Learning may occur either through objective or subjective reframing. “Objective reframing involves critical reflection on the assumptions of others encountered in a narrative or in task-oriented problem solving”. Subjective reframing occurs when an individual reflects critically on personal assumptions and then challenges, often with intense emotion and effort, existing perspectives and attitudes (Mezirow, 2000, 23).

The deepest level of learning, called Perspective Transformation, is defined as: “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectations to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative perspective; and finally making choices or otherwise acting on these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991, 167).

As Mezirow’s transformative learning focuses more on cognitive changes through critical reflection on experience (*rational orientation*), other scholars in learning theories explored other ways of knowing. Exploring alternate ways of thinking and acting while Brookfield (1987) offers ‘*intuition*’, Clark (1993) proposes ‘*affect*’ as an alternate way. Dirkx (1997) suggests *soul* learning, which accesses deeply rooted and extra-rational spiritual or emotional concerns through images such as poetry, rituals, or dreams. E. W. Taylor et al. (2000) drew attention to the *reciprocal relationship* between emotions and rationality. In addition, Janik (2007) suggests a *neurobiological* perspective where learning is seen as “volitional, curiosity-based, discovery-driven and mentor-assisted. A *cultural-spiritual* view of transformative learning is concerned with the “connection between individuals and social structures … and notions of intersecting positionalities” (Tisdell, 2005, 256). A *race-centric* view of transformative learning (William 2003, 463) emphasises race with its rites of passage and rituals as the predominant unit of analysis with an emphasis on the socio-political dimensions of learning. The goal of a *planetary* view of transformative learning

(O'Sullivan, 1999) is reorganization of the whole system, recognizing the interconnectedness among universe, planet, natural environment, human community and personal world.

## **2.2. Core Components of Transformative Learning**

The research findings confirm that these above-said orientations or views or perspectives tend to fall loosely into two theoretical frameworks. One framework emphasises personal transformation and growth, where the unit of analysis is primarily the individual with little attention given to the role of context and social change. The second framework sees nurturing transformative learning as being as much about social change as personal transformation, where individual and social transformation are inherently connected (Taylor, 2008).

Although scholars may disagree on various elements of the learning process, Edward Taylor (Taylor, 2009, 4-14) is able to identify the following essential components that frame a transformative approach in learning.

**Experience** is the fundamental avenue of transformative learning and consists of what the learner brings from prior experiences and also what the educand experiences at that particular stage. It “constitutes a starting point for discourse leading to critical examination of normative assumptions underpinning the learner’s... value judgments or normative expectations” (Mezirow, et al., 2000, 31). It is the nature of experiences, above all life experiences that provide the means for fostering transformative learning. Such experiences can be perceived as ‘pedagogical entry points’ (Lange, 2004, 129) that create opportunities for engaging a learner’s personal dilemma as a potentially transformative experience. Further, value-laden content and intense experiential activities can become a catalyst and can provoke and provide a process that facilitates transformative learning.

**Promotion of Critical Reflection** is the second element of fostering transformative learning. Critical learning describes the learner’s ability to question the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based on prior experiences. One’s awareness of conflicting thoughts, feelings, and actions can lead to a perspective transformation. Transformation of meaning perspective consists of three forms of reflection: reflecting on *what* one perceives, thinks, feels and acts (content); reflecting on *how* one perceives (process) and an awareness of *why* one perceives (premise). Premise reflection refers to examining the presuppositions underlying one’s knowledge of the world. Often, it is the least common and becomes the basis for critical reflection.

**Dialogue** with the self, others and the world is the third essential medium through which transformative learning is promoted and developed. Dialogue, in contrast to discussion, is the most often utilized medium in transformative learning “when we have reason to question the comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness (in relation to norms), or authenticity (in relation to feelings) of what is being asserted or to question the credibility of the person make the statement”

(Mezirow, 1991, 77). While discussion emphasises the analytical, point-counter point aspects, dialogue underscores the relational and trustful communication, often leading to “highly personal and self disclosing” (Carter 2002, 82) nature. It is essential to create ideal conditions to engage in reflective dialogue (cf. Mezirow & associates, 2000, 13-14) and pay attention to the “edge of meaning”, i.e., the liminal space where one can come to terms with the limitations of one’s knowing and thus begin to stretch those limits (Berger, 2004, 338).

The fourth fundamental element to foster transformative learning is the importance given to a **holistic orientation**. This orientation demands integration of all the factors: cognitive, affective and relational. Brown affirms that “learners rarely change through a rational process (analyse-think-change). Instead they are more likely to change in a see-feel-change sequence” (Brown, 2006, 732). In every critical reflection, there is inherently an affective knowing i.e., developing an awareness of feelings and emotions in the reflective process.

Developing a deeper appreciation and understanding of the **context**, both personal and socio-cultural factors that play an influencing role in the process of transformative learning, is the fourth essential component to be kept in mind in fostering transformative learning. Besides temporal constraints, the contextual perspective highlights also the barriers or inhibitions that result in the lack of or resistance to change.

Fostering transformative learning “depends to a large extent on establishing meaningful, genuine relationships” (Cranton, 2006, 5). **Authentic relationship** permits individuals to have a questioning discussion, share information openly and achieve greater mutual and consensual understanding. The significance of authenticity is manifested in five-facets: a strong sense of self awareness; a deep awareness of the needs and interest of learners and how they may differ from the interest of the educator; fostering the ability to be genuine and open with others; developing awareness of how context shapes practice and engaging in critical reflection and critical self-reflection about practice (Cranton, 2006, 113).

The final essential component, the **learner-centred** approach, is perceived under two perspectives by the transformative learning scholars. One group firmly affirms that the learner-centred approach is merely a method that is simply applied like any other technique while the other group is of the opinion that the learner-centred approach is a construct that serves as an umbrella term for the whole group of methods, including many, if not all, of the core elements discussed so far.

### **3. THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM -FORERUNNER OF TRANSFORMATIVE THEORIES**

It is evident from this concise presentation that Don Bosco’s educative system (Preventive System) already heralded the various constituent elements contained in the diverse theories of

Transformative Learning proposed by various scholars. The table below presents the mutual correspondence of the core elements.

<b>Preventive System</b>	<b>Theories of Transformative Learning</b>
Predilection for the Young	Learner centred
Holistic Method: Reason Religion Loving kindness	Critical reflection Soul-learning, extra rational spiritual Authentic Relationship
Context Socio-Industrial revolution Family Environment	Context Global, multi-cultural
Animating Presence (Assistance)	Dialogue
Educative Pastoral Community	Context
Holistic Goal: Transformation of the young	Transformative Learning
Holistic Content: Honest Citizens and Good Christians	Experiences

## CONCLUSION

Despite a growing understanding of Don Bosco's Preventive System and Transformative Learning theories, there is still a lot more to be discovered. Furthermore, the implementation of both the Preventive System and the theories of Transformative Learning demand much more than carrying out a series of instructional strategies. Each of them has a particular world view about the educative perspective. Furthermore, each perspective "should not be taken lightly or without considerable personal reflection. Although the rewards may be greater for both the educator and the educand, it demands a great deal of work, skill and courage" (Taylor, 2006, 92).

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