

# Transformative Learning as an approach for university courses in the context of ESD?

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# Outline

- Innovative ESD
- Transformative Learning
- Case Study: Self-organised course for sustainability (University of Erfurt)
- Methods applied
- Research Results
- Conclusion

# Background – Innovative ESD

## Higher Education for Sustainable Development is ...

- based on alternative student-centered approaches, i.e. research-based or project-oriented learning, challenge labs or roleplaying (Brundiers et al., 2010; Brundiers and Wiek, 2013; Cotton et al., 2009; Cotton and Winter 2012, Holmberg 2014),
- connected with international aspirations to implement ESD primarily through innovative/ participatory didactic methods and **as a transformative pedagogy** (UNESCO Executive Board, 2013, Annex 5b; UNESCO 2015),
- often portrayed as catalyst for quality improvement in education in general (Sterling 2012) and
- a way for students to actively shape small transformation processes and become the subjects of their own education (Wiek and Kay 2015).

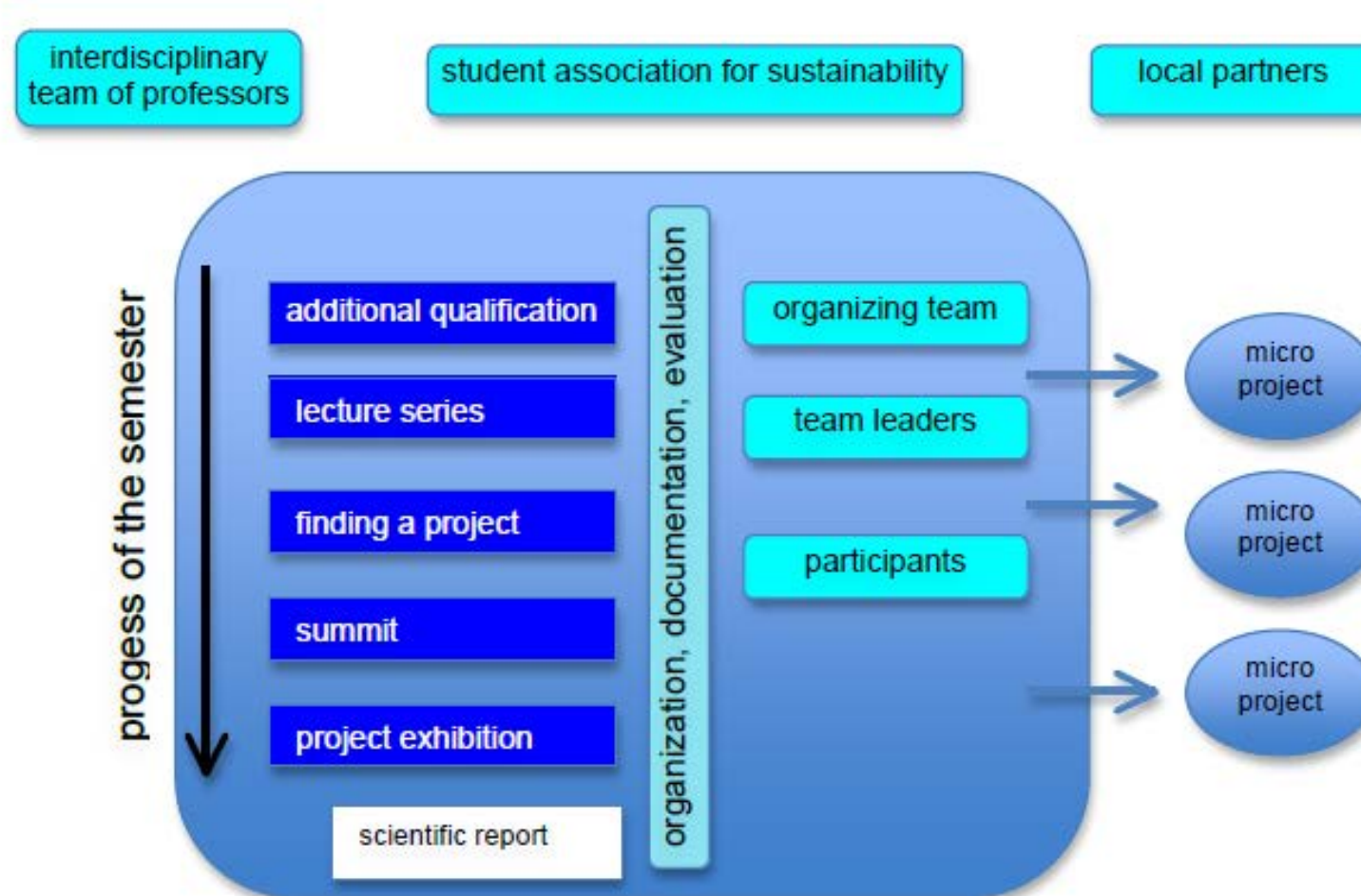
# Transformative Learning

- Origins in adult education/ social constructivist learning theories (Mezirow 1997, Lave and Wenger, 1991)
- Central Question: Which learning processes (without first linking them to specific content) transform adults' previous conceptions, (pre-) judgments and opinions and lead to critical thinking and judgment' ?  
(Zeuner, 2012: 93)
- Goal of transformative learning: changing meaning perspectives
- Different streams of transformative learning (Freire, 1970/O'Sullivan, 2002).
- Examining the cultural conditions and social negotiation processes in which knowledge is created (Brookfield, 2012)

# Phases of Transformative Learning

- a crisis/ confusion as starting point for questioning previous meaning perspectives (MP)
- the reflection on, and critical exchange about, crises in a small group creating an emancipatory moment through language and the possibility to transform MP
- new MP are tested and stabilized as the base for individual change processes
- new MP are integrated into one's own life and social environment & contribute to greater involvement in social change processes (Singer-Brodowski, 2016a: 99).

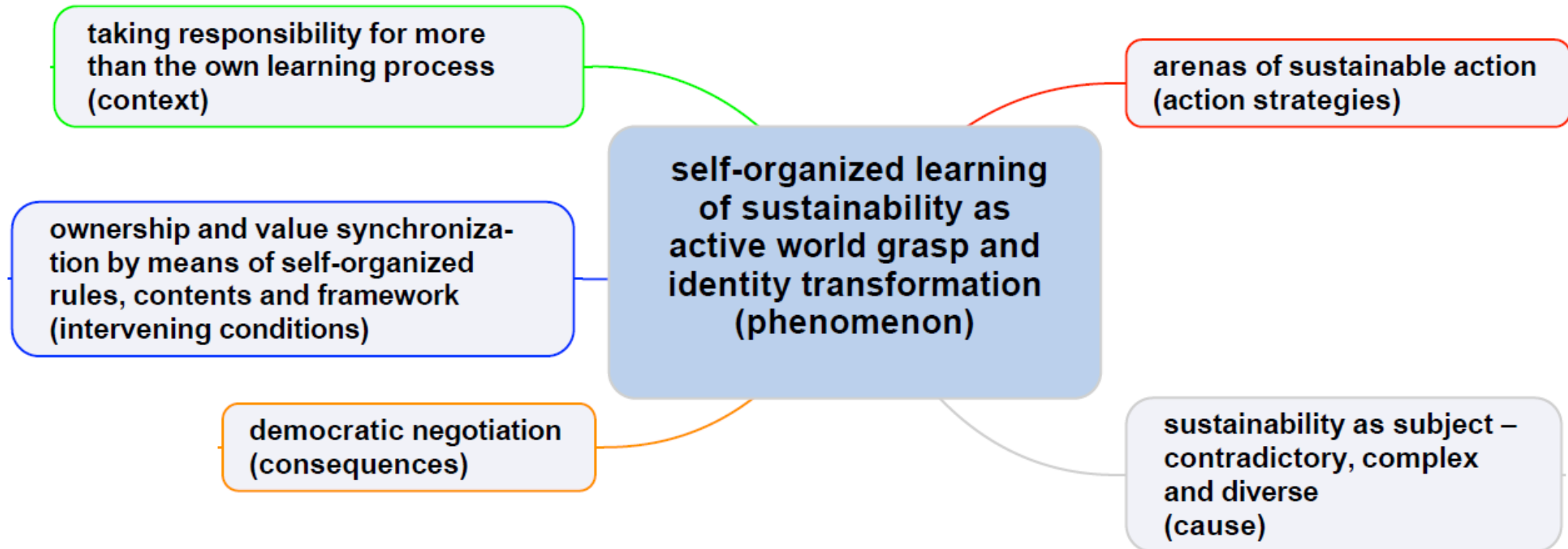
# Case study: Self-organised course at University of Erfurt



## Research Methods

- **Research question:** How do students in a self-organized and problem-based seminar on sustainability learn and how do they deal with the subject sustainability?
- **Qualitative reconstruction of competencies:** outcomes of a special learning process, that reflects cognitive, motivational and emotional aspects as well as performance
- Concrete methods: 15 problem-centred interviews (Witzel 2000) and in-depth-interviews (Charmaz 2011), 3 focus group discussions (Bohnsack 2007), 6 observation videos
- Analysis: data were coded in different phases (initial, focused and theoretical coding) → theoretical sampling (Singer-Brodowski 2016b)

# Results I





# Results II

## Sustainability Newcomers



inspiration for sustainability innovations



stabilization of sustainability innovations through reflection and discussions



persuasion of important others

project group

## Sustainability Experts



update of own thoughts on sustainability



discovery of and connection to regional sustainability scene



emancipation from former structures and construction of new ones

regional landscape of sustainability activists

# Conclusion

## Transformative Learning as an approach for university courses?

- students deal with sustainability issues in informal group settings not pre-structured by teacher
- informal learning spaces played a huge role
- significance of emotional aspects and challenges for students dealing with the subject of sustainability (Lundholm 2006)
- transformative learning processes can't be regulated or forced through university teachers, but they can create an inspiring learning environment that make transformative learning more probable

Thank you for your attention!

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