

Transformative Learning in a Transformed Learning Environment

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Abstract

Covid-19 presented a number of unforeseen issues for full-time mature students' transformative learning experiences. The key question being explored in this research is whether mature students achieved transformative learning during this unanticipated transfer of much of their college learning experience from campus based to an on-line environment, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This research is based on a detailed exploration of the learning experiences of 104 full-time mature students from two Institutes of Technology in Ireland. By using reflective accounts, which were structured using Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning, respondents were able to describe their views, insights, opinions, and experiences. Based on the information elicited from respondents, a number of themes were identified—namely personal circumstances, career, qualifications, personal growth, and confidence—all of which provided significant evidence of the achievement of transformative learning among the full-time mature student respondents in this research.

Keywords: Transformative learning, critical reflection, lifelong learning.

Introduction

Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory is defined as "the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic worldview and specific capacities of the self; transformative learning is facilitated through consciously directed processes such as appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of the unconscious and critically analysing underlying premises" (Elias, 1997, p. 3).

This research is based on an in-depth examination and evaluation of the learning experiences of 104 full-time mature students from two institutes of technology in Ireland. In the Irish education system, a mature student is anyone who is 23 years or older on January 1st of their first year of entry to third-level education (Irish Universities Association, 2022). The term adult learner may more accurately describe this type of student in other jurisdictions, but for the purpose of this research the participants are referred to as mature students.

Existing literature demonstrates that transformative learning can and does take place for mature learners who engage in on-line education, but in traditional circumstances the student has chosen to study on-line. The over-arching question being explored in this research is whether mature students showed evidence of transformative learning, given the transfer of a significant proportion of their formal learning to an on-line environment, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The participant's engagement with education in the on-line learning environment was not anticipated or explicitly chosen when they decided to attend full-time higher education on campus, and they engaged in remote emergency teaching as opposed to a traditional online programme of study. Rather, they were forced online, as were the academic staff responsible for facilitating their learning. This research sought to see if transformative learning could still occur in this unchartered context.

In order to elicit detailed responses from the research participants, it was decided to use reflective accounts. Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning were applied, thereby allowing

respondents to present their views and opinions in a more discursive manner than might have been possible using a closed question format.

Based on the information elicited from respondents, it was anticipated that a number of themes would be identified, which would provide evidence of the level of achievement of transformative learning among full-time mature student respondents in this research.

As a foundation for the empirical research, a review of relevant literature was undertaken, as explored in the following section.

Literature Review

Fanning and Gaba (2007) reported that adults prefer to apply their learning, be active in their learning, and experience their learning. These authors describe experiential learning as “learning by doing, thinking about, and assimilation of lessons learned into everyday behaviours” (p. 115).

Transformative learning explains how we make meaning, interpret experiences, and how we question, reflect on and converse about these experiences in order to develop and grow. It is an approach to teaching based on promoting change, where educators challenge learners to critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

Experiential uncertainty, in this case stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic, is both a global crisis and an individual experience for mature students and may involve a fundamental reconsideration of how one thinks, feels, or acts. Thus, transformative learning becomes not only a possibility, but a necessity. The opportunity to learn transformatively arises out of the experience of crisis or disorientation. In the light of Covid-19, pre-pandemic mindsets are dysfunctional. When our meaning perspectives are questioned, we are no longer able to interpret the situation based on our previous experiences (Mälkki, 2019). The experience of not-knowing, or the challenge of combining social solidarity with physical isolation, which have resulted from Covid-19 for many mature students, provide the kind of disruptions that transformative learning theory defines as disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991).

Jack Mezirow (1991) outlines ten phases within the process of perspective transformation. It begins with (1) a disorienting dilemma, which sets the stage for (2) an exploration of feelings like guilt or shame that arise due to the crisis or dilemma. In step (3), learners critically assess and reflect on their guiding assumptions underlying their current meaning perspective. This is followed by (4) the realisation that one’s personal problem is shared, and learners realise that others have undergone comparable changes and overcome similar challenges. In the next phase, (5) learners explore alternative ways of being and living in terms of relationships, roles, and actions. This phase is complemented by another phase, where (6) learners plan (new) courses of action and then (7) acquire new knowledge in order to put these courses of action into practice. Then learners provisionally try out these new roles (8), and then they (9) build (self-) confidence and competence and ultimately, (10) re-integrate new practices into their lives, employing a new, transformed meaning perspective, as well as experiencing personal growth and development (Irving & Williams, 1999). The concept of personal growth to achieve transformative learning through working with others is also discussed by Branshaw (2009).

According to Mezirow, what gets transformed as a result of transformative learning is what he terms a frame of reference or a meaning perspective. This involves cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. It selectively shapes and delimits perception, cognition, feelings, and disposition by predisposing one’s intentions, expectations, and purposes. “It provides the context for making meaning” (Mezirow, 2012, p. 82). Kegan (2000) comments that all good educators recognise that students come to the learning environment with prior knowledge that affects both their present and future learning. He refers to this prior knowledge as a student’s learning past.

Learning transformatively is not necessarily an endlessly positive experience in the context of self-actualisation. It is psychologically challenging, involving risks to one’s livelihood, social networks, and psychological stability (Brookfield, 1990). Brookfield identifies several layers of transformative learning, all of which are reflected in the current crisis: psychological stability is put at risk as emotionally charged situations arise and are experienced individually; social networks are at

risk due to the necessary isolation that has to be lived through physical distancing. The experience of being physically distant while being connected through social media adds additional challenges. In recognising the increasing propensity for mature students to avail of on-line learning, Cranton (2010, 2021) identified strategies for encouraging how transformative learning might be carried into that environment. She, along with Geraldine Torrisi-Steele, presented a revised version of this article in 2021 to reflect the changed learning environment that has resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, transformative learning is also empowering. The process begins with a disorienting dilemma: an individual is unable to make sense of an experience within her or his current pre-pandemic frame of reference, which in this context is the enforced transition to an on-line learning environment and thus adapting new learning to this new context may no longer be sufficient. When a well-established meaning perspective can no longer comfortably account for or facilitate anomalies in a new situation, a transformation may begin (Mezirow, 1978).

Wingo et al (2017) highlight the importance of academic leaders in the promotion of institutional plans to support on-line learners. Given the rapid transition to on-line learning, in the context of the Covid-19 imposed changes to the learning environment, there may have been little opportunity for such promotion. This may, in turn, have imposed an additional burden on learners who experienced an original disorienting dilemma, having lost their ability to implement their previous learning plan. Nichols et al (2020) explore the concept of pursuing academic qualifications through transformative learning in an on-line environment. The transition to an on-line learning environment may have left some mature students feeling a sense of urgency to rediscover a sense of direction; they are in need of “an exploratory, associative, open-ended, tolerant exchange of intimations free from the demand that it [should] issue in conclusions binding on all” (Arcilla, 1995, p. 7). This sense of direction needs to be rediscovered in the light of disorientation when concepts of health or normality are disrupted. Several studies have been conducted which highlighted the importance of strong student-centred, institutional support for on-line learning (Huang et al., 2011). Estes (2004) argues that while experiential educators may claim to value student-centred learning, the values, as evidenced in practice, may often be more teacher-centred (2004). The enforced transition to an on-line learning environment provided an opportunity to examine the level of student-centredness experienced by the mature student participants in this research.

Huang et al. (2011) suggest that despite many on-line learning studies having been undertaken, relatively few have explored the extent of educators’ on-line technology adoption. Buchan et al. (2011) investigate the transformational impact of introducing significant new learning technology. In a situation such as that currently being faced by students and educators alike, where acceptance of on-learning mechanisms is essential, any resistance to their use by teaching staff can have a ripple effect on students’ acceptance of such practices. King (2003) states that faculty members—and by extension students—in higher education face a multitude of demands and challenges in their work. Not least among these is the need to use technology in ways that will be meaningful and useful. Maguire (2009) argues that while faculty members may be excluded from discussions about and creation of distance education policy, they are still expected to willingly teach on-line courses. This challenge has been brought to the fore in the current learning environment. Orr, Williams, & Pennington (2009) state that effective processes, practices, and infrastructure are essential components of successful on-line teaching and learning efforts. Wang & Wang (2009) explore the increasing use of on-line learning tools and their wide application in both educational and non-educational institutions. Wickersham and McElhany (2010) explore the continued expansion of on-line education opportunities and the resulting importance of the establishment of institutional quality standards in relation to on-line education.

In addition to studies on academic staff-members’ readiness for the on-line teaching environment, a significant level of research has been undertaken in relation to the concerns shared by both faculty members and mature students as to the students’ technical skills and their abilities to use technology effectively in an on-line environment. Some of the most significant researchers in this context are Bacow et al. (2012). They discuss “the need for open, shared data on student learning and performance tracked through interactive on-line learning systems, and the need for investment in the creation of sustainable and customizable platforms for delivering interactive on-line learning instruction” (p. 3). Meyer (2013) explores the importance of designing on-line learning environments

that fit the needs of the specific learners in question. This is important in the context of interaction with mature students, as distinct from younger learners. Bolliger et al. (2009) sought to develop a self-reported measure of instructor satisfaction within the context of teaching in the on-line environment. Among the elements they identified in their five-factor model of most relevance to this research are instructor-to-student interaction and student-to-student interaction, both of which may be challenged by a transition to an on-line teaching and learning environment. In addition, Chapman et al. (2004) explore the importance of maintaining academic integrity in a remote learning context, while Green et al. (2010) outline academic institutions' evolving conceptualisations of learning as knowledge creation in the context of teaching and learning in on-line courses. This literature on on-line learning and its impacts on both lecturers and students shows that the issues facing academics and mature students due to enforced on-line learning are not new concerns in the academic environment. Gunawardena et al (2009) outlined many of the same concerns previously. However, in the context of the current pandemic, it would appear that, over time, both students and staff members have become accustomed to, and therefore more comfortable with using such on-line learning environments and mechanisms. As there is evidence of a gradual emergence from the current global crisis, the experiences and skills gained over the past number of years will likely enhance the teaching practices and learning experiences of mature students going forward.

Learning Perspectives

Mezirow (1991) draws heavily on the work of German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1971, 1984, 1987) and builds on the Habermasian ideas of discourse, instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory knowledge, as well as the role of argument and rationality as key concepts in his transformative learning theory. Mezirow identifies a Habermasian notion of discourse as the process through which one learns transformatively. Learning is central for Habermas (Habermas, 1975). It is not surprising that Habermas relates adult learning to his vision of a democratic society. He refers to this relation as the adult learning project (Habermas, 1987) and associates democracy with free and unrestrained communication. Habermas links “the importance of learning how to reason to adults’ ability to participate in democratic decision making” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 1131).

Habermas’ view of what adults need to be active citizens departs from the uncritical version of lifelong learning, where a lack of basic skills in concert with employability is central for adults in order to fulfil their roles as active citizens participating in democracy.

It is clear that Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory, Kegan and Lahey’s (2009) developmental approach and Habermas’ (1975) notion of learning democracy intersect: they all see a need to help adults learn to live with ambiguity and, in the context of Covid-19, uncertainty and not-knowing.

Transformative learning theory, as much as it focuses on individuals experiencing a perspective transformation, is mainly concerned with a discursive format to promote the kind of learning which is appropriate for deliberative decision-making processes and participation in democracy. What is missing is a philosophical grounding that reflects both processes of transformation and related, suitable concepts to foster transformative learning on a meta-theoretical level (Eschenbacher, 2019). In the context of Covid-19, this becomes apparent as a dilemma that needs to be adequately addressed through the theory of transformative learning.

American philosopher Richard Rorty (1989) differentiates the question of how one should live one’s life, where no consensus is necessary, from the question of how broader society should live our lives, where there is a need for consensus and solidarity, as required of citizens by governments in dealing with Covid-19. It is central to Rorty’s ideas that one is not trapped by one way of looking at the world that is forced on us. Whenever one encounters the experience of a crisis or dilemma, the limits of one’s frame of reference are revealed. The integrity of one’s deeply held assumptions is challenged, and people are invited to ask, “Does our use of these words get in the way of our use of those other words?” (Rorty, 1989, p. 12).

Transformative learning adds an additional, previously overlooked component to the discourse on lifelong learning, namely the inclusion of personal development as part of lifelong learning in the sense of being better able to live with uncertainty, and ambiguity. This may help some

people to master the challenges and demands of adults' everyday lives, even in the face of crises such as that which the world is currently experiencing with the Covid-19 pandemic. Transformative learning also has the potential to transform a global and individual crisis into a learning experience which addresses both the individual and society.

Malcom Knowles (1984) researched this idea in the 1980s and proposed a model of adult learning called Andragogy, which views the adult learner as a primary source of data for making sound decisions regarding the learning process (Knowles et al., 1998, p. 183). Knowles' definition of Andragogy involves four interconnected assumptions about adult learners:

1. *Self-concept*. This assumption is that as a person grows and matures, their self-concept moves from one of total dependency (as is the reality of the infant) to one of increasing self-directedness. Adults may be more likely to resist or resent instances when others impose their will upon them (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).
2. *Role of experience*. Adults enter a learning situation with a wealth of experience. This may serve as a resource to make learning meaningful. Estes (1991) states that "*learning consists, not in modifying the units (or experiences), but only of establishing associations between units*" (p.6). However, we must also be aware of how prior assumptions can act as barriers to this development (Kagan, 1992; Slotta et al., 1995), and determine ways to challenge the assumptions that are causing the barriers.
3. *Readiness to learn*. Unlike many children, adults need to know the utility and value of the content they are learning and how it applies to them and their future careers (Knowles et al., 2005). Tough (1979) argues that the first task of a teacher of adult learners is to help them become aware of the need to know.
4. *Orientation to learning*. Adults are life-centred and/or problem-centred in their desire to learn. Thus, adults learn best and are motivated more when knowledge skills and attitude are presented in the context of real-life problem solving (Knowles et al., 2005).

Kegan & Lahey (2009) explore the notion of a hidden mindset that creates a natural but enforcing immunity to change. Through the transformative learning process, students must learn to continually challenge this reluctance to change based on their assumptions and structure their knowledge differently. A central role of the educator in the transformative learning context is to serve as an "agent of change" by creating an active learning environment that facilitates such personal and cognitive transformation. Transformative learning is designed to help individuals develop better assumptions about the world that will guide their activities more effectively and create enhanced conditions for learning and social action (Mezirow, 1989, 2012).

A key application of transformative learning theory, as it relates to mature students, lies in the concept of experiential learning, which in its simplest form refers to learning by doing. Experiential education first immerses learners in an experience and then encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking (Mälkki, 2019; Brookfield, 2000; Estes, 2004). Mackintosh (2014) believed experiential learning contributes to the transformative learning experience and supports changes in learners' points of view. Learning that is transformative occurs when situations cause one to question currently held frames of reference and, as a result, alter them to reflect their acquisition of knowledge due to a specific experience (Mezirow, 1994). Fanning and Gaba (2007) argued that adult learners need to actively participate in an experiential learning environment in order to learn effectively and transfer that learning to their own contexts. Among the most significant outcomes of such experiences to be explored in this research, is an increase in student self-confidence, as described by Pomeroy and Oliver (2021). A key issue focused on in this research is whether the transition to on-line learning imposed, of necessity, on mature students as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, has resulted in unexpected, enhanced learning opportunities.

This research involved the collection and analysis of qualitative data from full-time mature students and the research methodology applied is described in detail in the following section.

Research Aim

The aim of this research was to capture the lived experience of mature learners who were plunged into an unfamiliar learning environment due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors sought to examine if these students demonstrated evidence of transformative learning through their own reflective accounts of each of Mezirow's ten phases.

Research Scope and Limitations

This research examines the experiences of 104 mature students in two Irish institutes of technology. The findings are therefore not generalisable. However, this research provided the opportunity to record and analyse the lived experience of these students during an unforeseen and challenging event, the Covid-19 pandemic. A longitudinal study with an additional qualitative data collection phase using a method such as semi-structured in-depth interview would help to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the transformative learning experience, but that is beyond the scope of this research, which sought evidence of, rather than a wholistic understanding of transformative learning among this specific cohort, at this specific point in time.

Research Methodology

This phenomenological research employed a qualitative approach and thematic analysis (Creswell, 2009; Brauna & Clark, 2006; Saunders et al., 2012). to determine the extent to which, if any, evidence of transformative learning could be identified among the reflective accounts of mature learners who had to engage in remote emergency learning on-line due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We acknowledge that we cannot separate ourselves entirely from the research as we are working as educators of mature learners, but in so far as possible, we sought to set aside and bracket our own experiences in order to focus on and derive meaning from the participants' experiences (Nieswiadomy, 1993 cited in Creswell, 2009). A constructivist rather than positivist assumption guided this research, as we believe that human experience is socially constructed, rather than a social reality that can be objectively known and measured (Greene, 2007). There is no one truth in terms of the experience of transformative learning, rather participants can only report their experiences of what they believe constitutes transformative learning for them; "lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research... [it] is the breathing of meaning" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 36).

The research gathered data from full-time undergraduate mature students in years one to four of their programme of study. The purposive sampling allowed the researchers to target current students who had initially registered for a campus course but are now undertaking their studies on-line. This phenomenological study required placing the student at the centre of the research, as it is their actual lived experience (Dewey, 1938; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006) that determines the extent to which transformative learning has occurred, and through a greater understanding of this experience, we hope to develop the capacity to facilitate transformative learning for our students. Students who met the inclusion criteria ($n = 1,509$) were invited to participate in the on-line survey, by way of an e-mail, which was distributed centrally by each Institute of Technology to those students who met the criterion of being registered as full-time mature students. They were asked to complete a reflective account of their learning experience. Informed consent was sought, and participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous. There was no incentive offered to encourage participation.

Similar to a diary entry or personal log, the reflective account required the participants to reflect on events of which they have lived experienced and consider the impact these experiences may have had on their lives and their self-perceptions (Saunders et al., 2012). Having completed some short demographic questions, the participants were given a brief overview of each phase of the transformative learning process and asked to consider and describe their experience of each of the ten stages of Mezirow's transformative learning theory. This method fits well in the study of transformative learning, as the process of transformative learning itself requires reflective practice by the students which requires the participant to make themselves "the object of self-inquiry" (Mortari, 2015, p. 1), a process through which they become the subject of their own experience. The

participants were not required to respond to all questions. They had the option to skip questions if desired, as it could not be assumed that all students would have had experienced all of the phases of transformative learning but may have experienced some.

The on-line survey was accessible for a period of two weeks, and there were 104 responses received, a response rate of 6.9%. Thematic analysis, which focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of behaviour (Aronson, 1995), was used to derive meaning from the data. The six phases of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clark (2006) were followed closely and this was a recursive rather than a linear process to allow movement back and forth between the phases as required. Initially, the authors familiarised themselves with the qualitative responses that had been collected and organised the data in preparation for the open and axial coding that followed. The initial open coding phase allowed for the development of initial concepts based on the words used by the participants to describe their experiences of transformative learning. Initially, this was conducted individually by the authors and then reviewed together to progress and search for themes. Microsoft Excel was used to record the frequency with which themes and subthemes were reported. The themes were then reviewed and refined to create an overall understanding of the data, and compelling extracts were chosen from the data set to illustrate and support the findings.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was the methodology through which the reported experiences of the participants were considered. This method allowed the authors to acknowledge our input into the process of attributing meaning to the data rather than trying to remove ourselves entirely and most importantly give experience primacy (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Critics argue that this flexibility can be mistaken for lack of rigour (Larkin et al., 2006). However, we believe this method is appropriate as it aims to create understanding of the participants' world and their lived experience and then allows the development of a more overt interpretation of their experiences, and in this context in particular, how their experiences have been impacted by the move to on-line learning.

Finally, the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis were considered in the context of the literature related to transformative learning and also in the context of previous research we had undertaken into transformative learning by mature learners (Moloney, 2018; Moran, 2015). These themes are discussed in the following sections.

Findings and Discussion

During the course of this research, 104 full-time mature students provided detailed insights into their transformative learning experiences. A more comprehensive analysis of the data would necessitate follow-up interviews being carried out with respondents, which is beyond the scope of this research. However, there is clear evidence of all 10 phases of transformative learning, as described by Mezirow. In addition, respondents demonstrated that they expect to be treated differently in the workplace as a result of having undertaken their formal full-time education. This data was collated and then based on the level of commonality among respondents' perspectives, it was categorised using five core themes: personal circumstances, career, qualifications, personal growth, and confidence, which are also dominant in both the general transformative learning literature and that which focuses on transformative learning opportunities in an on-line environment. Rather than presenting the findings from each of the phases, we have chosen to focus on the themes that emerged from the data across all responses, as these themes indicate the issues that were of most concern to the participants, therefore reflecting their lived experience, which forms the basis of phenomenology. The following sections provide a detailed discussion of the findings from the analysis of this qualitative data.

Personal Circumstances

During their reflective accounts, many participants described various personal circumstances that had affected their decision to attend a higher education institution as a mature learner. An individual's perception of their own personal circumstances is an important consideration in the work of Rorty (1989, 2009). Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2005) argue that "educators have a critical responsibility to acknowledge, respect and understand people from diverse backgrounds" (p. 30). The impact of the enforced transition to on-line learning may have had an additional impact on the

personal circumstances of some mature students, as described by King (2003). Additionally, Greenman and Dieckmann (2004) examine how the context in which a mature student is undertaking a course may impact on the level of transformative learning they achieve. The most prominent aspects that emerged included health, family and relationships. In addition, many participants reported that the time was just right for their return to education, either as a result of a change in their employment status or a change in their family circumstances such as divorce or their family having grown up.

Physical and mental health, as described in the research of Tsimane and Downing (2020), were dominant themes which emerged from the data. For some participants their health issues were linked to the work they were doing before becoming a mature learner, one stating that “I no longer want to work in a job that breaks my body”; and for others there were external factors that had negatively impacted their health, “I was involved in a car accident which left me unable to work and decided to go back into education.” A significant number of students also reported having experienced depression, while some signalled additional forms of mental illness and issues with substance misuse.

For others, the health of those around them had impacted their ability to realise their potential and their financial wellbeing, as explored in the work of Losada and Alkire (2019), “Being unemployed after caring for my mother for six years and being left with little opportunities other than [sic] menial jobs with little prospect of bettering my financial situation which is dire.” Another carer was embracing the opportunity to access education, but for their own fulfilment, “having been a carer for my autistic daughter for twenty years, I wanted to fulfil my dream of studying.” There were participants who reported that their health had hindered previous attempts to access education and for others it restrained their ability to work in areas in which they had previously trained. There was a common belief that accessing education would improve general physical and mental health outcomes, but there was also one participant who explicitly reported wanting to use education to try to maintain their health, “my brother got Alzheimer’s, so I decided to activate my brain.” Accessing education helped to provide hope for some students who had experienced physical and mental health issues, “since developing a health issue I was unsure and quite insecure... being able to return to college and find a more suitable path has improved my physical and mental health and my hopes for the future.”

Many students reflected on the impact that their family had on their decision to pursue their education, some positive and some negative, “I felt inadequate with my siblings.” There were a number of people who reported having chosen to return to education after raising their family, “life got in the way, but now my kids are in college, so I’m able to go,” or having reached a milestone stage in their family, “had two small children so when they both started school I decided to go back to college.” There were also a number of participants who identified that they wanted to set an example within their own family, “I am a single mother and I know if I was going to be able to put my kids through college, I was going to need to go back myself” and another, “I felt I needed to go as I could tell my kids I went, and they could not throw it back at me that I did not go.” Finally, other participants outlined how their family situations had limited their opportunity to engage in education either through lack of funding or encouragement, while another had dropped out of a previous course to “spite my parents.”

Career

For many participants their careers were prominent in their minds when reflecting on the phases of transformative learning. References to careers, jobs, employability and opportunities for progression were dominant throughout the data gathered in a variety of different contexts and this is also reflected in the literature on career progression as it relates to transformative learning (Fleming, 2018). Initially, when considering the disorienting dilemma phase, career was clearly the predominant theme that emerged in response. Many respondents indicated that their decision to engage in education had been initiated due to a change in their employment status, “out of work due to Covid, so wanted to do something valuable with my time,” or dissatisfaction with their current employment, “I grew tired of working dead end jobs for bad pay and decided that I wanted a career.” Education was identified as the means through which career paths could be identified, “me returning to college is a way of getting a good job,” as well as a way through which one could pivot career, “I wanted to change my career path” and gain access to improved working terms and conditions, “improve my quality of life by getting educated and getting a more secure job.”

During consideration of the latter phases of transformative learning, career remained a prevailing theme. When asked to consider the process of dealing with guilt or shame, some participants identified that their job options had been limited by circumstances, but social pressure made them feel as though they were not productive members of society, “makes you feel ashamed of your circumstances (non-productive person, lack of formal education). As a woman without studies, I was offered a very limited range of jobs...most of them preconceived to role-gender or social-class status.” Others identified that the work they were currently doing was having a negative impact on them and their families, “I was irritable and tired all the time as a result of working nights” and “I became more disillusioned with my job, I became more depressed.” Education was seen as the key to escaping low paid, menial work to pursue a fulfilling career not only for the students themselves but also to provide a better life for their families, “working in jobs with lack of progression and unchallenging, as well as wanting a better life for my children.”

The tone of respondents when discussing their future career opportunities was extremely positive, with many reporting that they felt they were now better equipped to find employment in a career that they would find rewarding, “I have a challenging and fascinating career ahead of me.” Not only did they believe that there were more job opportunities opening up for them as a result of their education, but they had also found the capacity to seize such opportunities, “optimistic about future job opportunities and confident in myself that I can achieve what I want if I put my mind to it.” The newfound belief participants had developed in themselves was evident, “I feel more independent, able, confident to take my place in the professional work place,” and “I am much more likely to take on leadership roles.” In addition, many of the respondents reported having gained skills and changed attitudes, such as improved time management, technical skills, writing skills, verbal and written communication skills, greater levels of patience, more focus, better critical thinking skills and lower levels of judgement of others which may well be transferrable to their new working environments.

As outlined previously, an improvement in career prospects, a redundancy or an unemployment spell were frequently mentioned when students discussed their reasons for returning to education. It is very satisfying to see that many held the belief that these objectives will be met and are looking forward to, for some in their own microcosm “working in an area that I’m interested in rather than working just to pay the bills,” and for others at broader levels, “being able to implement change in the world for the better.”

Qualifications

This section explores the influential impact that a mature student’s lack of formal academic qualifications can have on their willingness to return to full-time education. Nichols et al (2020) explore the concept of gaining formal academic qualifications through transformative learning in an on-line environment. There are a number of significant quotes from the survey which illustrate the importance placed by respondents on having a recognised third-level academic qualification.

The level of engagement with learning was illustrated by one student who stated that he or she, “Was hoping to complete the Level 8 [Honours] degree, along with own commitments.”

The acknowledgement of, “not being able to get a desirable job with Level 5 [Higher Certificate] qualifications” highlighted the importance to this respondent of getting a better qualification.

The opportunity to pursue higher level qualifications was also identified by mature students, one of whom stated that they were, “out of work due to Covid-19 so wanted to do something valuable with my time. Going back to college to complete a Level 8 degree had always been a goal of mine.” Thus, the unexpected impact of Covid-19 facilitated them in pursuing their long-held ambition.

The limited prospects available to them was a key theme that emerged from the importance of gaining qualifications. Responses in this category included, “Previously [I] went to college and graduated with a L8 hon. No jobs in this field without further study, no security even with further study. Went back to study in field of secure job in the future, i.e. nursing.” Similarly, another research participant stated:

I had done a Plc [post-leaving certificate course] level 5 the year before I started college, this was the first time I was back to education since leaving school in 1990, I found the plc course

and was advised to further my education which I first thought I could not do, the course I am doing now is very interesting and I am glad I am in college.

This perspective of the importance of qualifications was also reflected in the comments of another respondent, who stated, “I realised how limiting the work landscape had become for an individual with no formal qualification. I reasoned that I would be a more attractive prospect to an employer as a graduate.”

The feeling of regret at not having gained academic qualifications previously also came to the fore in this research. One respondent stated, “I had always regretted not getting a degree when I finished secondary school and because I had been in dead end jobs with little room to grow, I felt it was time to get a qualification” while another stated that they, “only had the leaving certificate as qualification. College was the next step sooner or later.”

Similarly, a number of research participants stated that they had previously attended college and now felt the need to enhance their academic qualifications by returning to full-time higher education, “Having completed my Level 7 [Ordinary] degree, seven years ago, I wanted to upskill while also changing career goals.”

The final sub-category of mature students which came to our attention in this research was those who are currently working in a specific area but wanted or needed to gain a formal academic qualification in that area. Examples of direct quotations from some of those in this category included, “[I wanted/needed] to receive a qualification in the role I’m already working in.” One respondent stated that he or she, “wanted a qualification in my chosen area and had decided it was the right time for me” while another explained, “I wanted a career and going to college was the only way i would achieve a career in my chosen field.”

Personal Growth

Personal growth is a transformational process, in which improvements are made in one’s physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social, and/or financial state. From a theoretical perspective, such an evolution is reflected in the work of Green et al. (2010). Cranton (2021) also examined how transformative learning, through personal growth, might take place in an on-line learning environment. In exploring transformative learning in on-line learning, Branshaw (2009) identified a multidimensional potential to connect others and create a sense of community of working together. In exploring this theme, we identified a number of inter-connected constructs, namely maturity, shared experiences and the development of a course of action to move forward (Irving & Williams, 1999).

In the context of maturity, and the importance of recognising the power of reflection, one respondent said, “I assumed it would be easier to study from home and on-line, but I found it very difficult to get back into using technology at such a high level of engagement.”

Another stated, “I assumed that it would be a daunting challenge entering third level without any formal higher level of education, however I underestimated how much reading was involved and that it would take a major effort to keep up with the required course work.” This reflection also highlighted the level of engagement and the recognition of the active role that this student has with their own learning.

In a similar vein, another research participant stated, “I didn't think it would take up so much of my down time after lecture contact hours or that I would struggle so much with balancing study time and home life commitments.”

It is important to recognise that not every mature student will have a predominantly positive experience of learning, as described by this mature learner, “I deeply regret it and regret my choice of course. I feel more of a failure now than I did before I started my course.” Equally, it is also significant to acknowledge that the majority of responses received showed a very positive appreciation for mature student learning, “Everything is going according to plan.”

Shared experience was a common perception, with one student stating, “I still find the workload heavy at times but that seems to be a common feeling among my classmates so that makes me feel better that it is not just me.”

In describing their broader shared experiences, one research participant stated, “Yes, I think everyone in the class at the beginning was overwhelmed it was so new for us all. We all had different reasons for going back to college and we did share those experiences with each other.” This showed that while their reasons for returning to full-time higher education may have differed, these students share the common bond of being full-time mature students.

The third element of personal growth described in this section involves recognition of the development of a new skillset leading to the formulation of an alternative course of action. One research participant remarked:

My motivation and confidence have grown and from this place I face future with the best tools. I am more positive and aware of my potential. I face difficulties with the conviction that it's in my hands and I don't depend of others as before.

This illustrates a strong level of integration between their prior knowledge, what returning to college has taught them and how they intend to apply these new-found skills in future.

The enhanced feeling of self-worth was a dominant element of this section. Examples included, “I’m achieving something for me, and it gives me a sense of self-worth” and “I think my self-confidence has grown. I feel better able to work off my own judgements, and I’m currently working in an area that I am interested in rather than working just to pay the bills.” This feeling of self-worth is, in turn, intrinsically linked to the concept of self-belief as described in the respondents’ statements, for example one who is, “Believing more in myself.”

Confidence

One of the most dominant themes to emerge from the data was that of confidence. Pomeroy et al. (2021) explore the role of confidence as an indicator of transformative change. Bacow et al. (2012) discuss tracking the changing confidence in students, while Bolliger & Wasilik (2009) and Wingo et al (2017), in addition to Wang & Wang (2009), examine the concept of confidence in the context of the use of learning technology.

Several students reported feeling increased levels of confidence having undertaken their education, particularly when asked to reflect on the final stages of transformative learning theory. As one respondent put it, “I am finding little nuggets of gold... ‘confidence.’”

Many participants reported increased confidence in themselves generally, “It has boosted my self belief and my confidence in myself,” and also confidence in specific skills “I am much more confident in my ability to write creatively.” Furthermore, they are feeling more confident in the process of their education, “I am more confident to answer questions, even if the answer is wrong, because it still teaches me and others.” Individuals have reported greater levels of confidence in their ability to interact with people around them and feel more empowered to stand up for what they believe in, “I now have the confidence to challenge situations I see as oppressive towards other groups and more likely to speak up.”

Other respondents identified that their confidence and their belief in their academic ability has increased, “I’m more confident that I can complete my college work to a high standard” and that they have been able to employ this in a professional capacity while on work placement, “I’m more competent while out on placement and more confident talking to other nurses and patients.” One participant outlined how they had “no confidence in first year” but became more confident with every assignment and exam that they completed and reached a point where, “I wasn’t afraid to ask for help and I wasn’t afraid of failing.” Many students reported simply having more confidence and, “believing more in myself” and having more confidence in their mental capacity, “I have more confidence in my intelligence” and in their ability to secure a meaningful future for themselves, “I feel more independent, able, confident to take my place in the professional workplace.”

There were some participants who believed they had always had confidence and that it has been their life experience rather than their education that has given them that confidence, “I am very confident and also competent. I did not need to go to college to achieve this. I learned these skills in the school of hard knocks and would not have it any other way.” However, students who articulated this were very much in the minority compared to those who believed that their confidence had

increased as a result of their engagement with education, and many outlined their sense of achievement “when I started, I had zero confidence in my ability to achieve academically or socially. I have achieved both” and their belief that they are now better prepared for employment, “I think I have gained confidence in myself... I feel better equipped in the work environment as I did previously have experience but now, I have a lot more knowledge.”

For some students their increasing confidence has manifested itself in a belief that they can achieve more now than they would have thought possible:

my dream is to become a network engineer I always felt it was out of reach or I would not be clever enough to achieve it but college is really helping me get more confident and helps me think why not me, with each passing week.

The students are becoming empowered to initiate change in their lives through their increased confidence.

Having discussed the findings from this research, the final section draws a number of overarching conclusions.

Conclusion

Transformative learning offers mature learners the opportunity to create new meaning schema and challenge the existing assumptions they have of themselves, and their world, based on habitual expectations familiar to everyone. This transformation allows the learners to question their expectations of “how things are supposed to be” (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 4), thus helping them to change expectations they may have of themselves based on their previous life experiences. Mezirow argued that the experiences in the classroom itself are as important as the academic material and qualifications that they will have access to (Mezirow et al., 2009). Given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the learning environment, we wanted to investigate whether transformative learning could still occur for mature learners who were forced into a virtual learning environment, despite having registered for an on-campus programme of study. Fortunately, this research has established that mature learners did experience transformative learning in this new learning environment.

The use of a reflective account allowed us to understand how the mature learners related to the ten phases of transformative learning. Despite initial concerns that mature student participation in this research might be difficult to secure, we were very much heartened by the number of mature learners who chose to share their experiences with us for this research and we believe that this reflects the willingness of mature learners to reexamine their existing assumptions and engage in transformative learning. This critical reflection is what Mezirow believed was fundamental to allowing students question their perspectives and assumptions and increase their capacity to transform and create new meaning schema (Brookfield, 2000).

In this research we saw how some learners did not have the opportunity earlier in their lives to access higher education, and some described feelings of guilt and shame associated with that lack of opportunity, although not all felt this. For some, it was merely a case that the “time was right” and they now had the opportunity to study due to a change in their employment, health, relationship, or family status. Many of the respondents outlined how they believed education and formal qualifications would provide the key for them to escape menial, low paid jobs and embark on more rewarding careers that would provide financial stability for them and their families.

As outlined in the literature review, the process of transformative learning is an integral part of ensuring active citizenship in participatory democracy. It helps the learner navigate ambiguity and develop their deliberative decision-making capacity. Participants in this research reported having more confidence in themselves and their abilities. Many have found self-belief and dispelled doubts that they had about themselves or believed society attributed to them due to their lack of formal education. Our research supports the contention that transformative learning continued to occur for this cohort of mature students in a transformed learning environment.

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