Pathways to Transformation: Supporting Adult Learners' Personal Transformations Through Transformative Learning Theory

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Abstract

Adult learners returning to formal learning after many years out of education often do so with anxieties and apprehensions, possibly having had poor previous experiences of education in the past (Askham, 2008; Goodchild, 2017). Pedagogical designs within pre-entry programmes aim to overcome these anxieties, often resulting in personal transformations through renewed confidence within the educational environment. Within this context Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory is potentially challenged as adult learners are eased gently into the formal learning environment through pedagogic designs which focus on individual communications with a tutor, who supports and guides the student in terms of developing academic confidence and study skills. In this situation, it is likely that the tutor is perceived as the expert, supporting their student to develop the skills necessary to embark on a formal undergraduate qualification. Full application of Mezirow's transformative learning theory is one step beyond this pathway to transformation but nonetheless, contributes to the personal transformation that enables the student to thrive in the formal educational as they progress. Interviews with 23 adult learners engaged on the first year of an undergraduate qualification, having studied a pre-entry module, were undertaken. The interviews explored the impact of previous experiences of education with participants, and how the particular pedagogic designs within the educational institutional supported or exacerbated their personal transformation. Findings suggest that experiences are individual and unique, requiring flexibility and consistency in pedagogic design throughout the student journey. Educational institutions should recognise that transformation is elastic and certain conditions and situations which may align with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, have the potential to both erode or enhance the personal transformations that have developed over time.

Keywords: Adult Learners, Transformative Learning Theory, Mezirow, Higher Education

Introduction

The process by which transformative learning occurs has been clearly articulated by academics over the years, originating from Jurgen Habermas (1984) in terms of communicative action and subsequently developed by Jack Mezirow (1991), David Jarvis (2006) and Knud Illeris (2017). Their approaches to transformative learning suggest, in general terms, that through a process of learning that involves interaction, reflection and socialisation, new knowledge is created or existing knowledge is reaffirmed. This approach is pertinent to adult learners, particularly those who have been out of formal learning for some time, who come to the learning environment with pre-conceived ideas and beliefs, brought about by their life experience (Mezirow, 1991). The situation is less evident, although not entirely obsolete, for younger learners, and the process by which transformative learning occurs is evidenced by pedagogical approaches that encourage active participation and dialogue, rather than the transmission of information, between all of those involved in the learning process (Freire, 1972).

Within a higher education (HE) environment, such approaches clearly focus on the development of an individual through pedagogic approaches that encourage critical thinking, dialogue and reflection. This higher-level knowledge not only enables wider career opportunities for

individuals but also benefits the economy through increased competitiveness and productivity (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016; Million Plus, 2013), and society through more active citizenship (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Within the English HE policy context, the measures by which the quality of HE teaching is judged predominantly focus on hard outcomes such as the awarding of a good degree (first or 2:1) or progression to highly skilled employment or further study (Office for Students, 2022). They fail to recognise the personal transformations that occur through the process of learning, which may include the application of transformative learning theory in addition to a general engagement in learning. For adult learners in particular, the personal transformations that occur can often be more powerful than the process of learning and what is being learned.

Using Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory as a framework, the study presented in this article explores the concept of transformative learning within the context of adult learners at a large global distance learning university, based in the UK. The study builds on the literature that suggests prior educational experiences have a significant impact on adult learners as they return to learning in terms of confidence and sense of belonging (Cross, 1981; McGivney, 1990; Waller 2006). Mapping the pedagogical design for both an entry-level course and year one of a degree programme, the research presents the experiences of adult learners in terms of the impact of their study experience on their own personal transformations. Through qualitative methods, it explores the specific challenges that participants have experienced in their previous formal educational environments and how the pedagogical models adopted as they return impact on their subsequent learning journey.

The findings of the research suggest that the process of personal transformational learning begins at different points in time prior to an individual's decision to formally register with an HE provider. Support from peers, family and friends is key to this process with the introductory modules contributing to increasing personal transformation, despite persistent anxieties, as a result of poor previous educational experiences. Pedagogical models that neglect to acknowledge the individualised learning experience have the potential to erode the confidence of adult learners that has been systematically built up over time. Transformational learning is not a continual, progressive process, and the pace at which personal transformation subsequently occurs can differ between individuals. Exposure to the different elements of the learning environment impact on this transformation. This suggests that persistent exposure to a perceived negative learning environment has the potential to negate the positive transformation that the initial introduction to HE level study has had. Responding to this transformational elasticity requires a pedagogical design that recognises the factors that may impact on an individual's personal transformation, above and beyond transformative learning theory. Flexibility and consistency within the pedagogical design are necessary conditions to ensure adult learners returning to learning after many years out of formal education, can be supported to succeed.

Literature Review

The Neglect of Transformative Learning

The benefits of participating in HE have been reported by European and UK educational policy makers for many years (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2010, 2013; Delors, 1996, Department for Education and Employment, 1998; Faure, 1972; Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). These benefits relate to the economy, to society and to the individual. Economic benefits relate to the ability to meet higher level skills needs (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016) increasing global competitiveness (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2010), enabling faster innovation and technology transfer (Adnett, 2016) and increasing productivity, competitiveness and profitability within businesses (Million Plus, 2013). Benefits to society include increased participation such as volunteering and voting, lower crime, better general health, political stability, and increased citizenship (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). Benefits to the economy are also evident within benefits to the individual. Increased employment opportunities from an increasingly competitive and innovative economy, improve job

opportunities and have the potential to increase earnings, create greater social capital, and transform an individual in terms of the creation of new or affirmation of existing knowledge. This contributes to personal development (Centenary Commission, 2021) an attribute that is often overlooked within the measures of success of participation in HE.

Despite these policy reports presenting these three domains as equal in importance, in reality it is the economic benefits that dominate policy decisions within the English education system and, more specifically HE. This is evidenced by the persistent focus on good degrees (a 2:1 or a first), graduate outcomes in terms of progression to highly skilled employment or further study, as well as continuation and retention metrics, all imposed by the regulator of HE, the Office for Students (OFS, 2022). There is no dispute against the need for the HE sector to provide high quality courses that support students to achieve their ambitions, ensuring that students from all backgrounds, including those who have been disadvantaged and are underrepresented, have equity with their peers. The narrow focus on these, 'easy to measure' metrics however, masks what, whilst more challenging, should be considered an equally valued and measured benefit of HE, namely, its transformative power.

Relevance to Adult Learners

This neglect is particularly relevant for adult learners, especially those who have been out of formal education for many years, as they often return to the formal learning environment having had poor experiences of education in the past which has contributed to their disengagement at an early age (Tight, 1998). As a result of that experience, they often lack confidence in their academic ability (Goodchild, 2017) and are anxious about how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves within this formal learning environment (Mallman and Lee, 2016). This impacts them even before they decide to participate in any form of learning and influences their sense of belonging within that environment and their subsequent decision to register with an institution. Adult learners present a multitude of identities – parent, carer, employee, student (Butcher, 2015) – and bring complex histories and a wealth of life experience with them (Askham, 2008). As such, this impacts on how they engage within a formal learning environment and subsequently influences the pedagogy within which programmes of study are designed. Approaches to supporting younger students, coming from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds into the HE environment focus on embedding academic skills development within induction and first year programmes (Thomson, 2022). This is thought to prepare students for successful participation in HE as they progress into years 2 and 3. They also focus on developing a sense of identity and belonging (Reay, 2010), using mentoring and buddying schemes (Thomas, 2012) as well as the visibility of positive role models throughout the university environment (Hume, 2018). The wider university cultural experience is therefore seen as important in contributing to successful participation and outcomes. In addition to these initiatives, programmes and curriculum designed to specifically address the issues faced by adult learners can also focus on the development of softer skills, such as increasing confidence, through bespoke pedagogical designs which facilitate the introduction into the HE learning environment. These programmes move the emphasis beyond the internal process by which transformative learning occurs to one which creates the external conditions which enable personal transformation to take place. Such initiatives recognise what Jarvis (2006) and Illeris (2017) criticised Mezirow (1991) for, in terms of his narrow focus on the individual, adding another dimension to these models of learning which aim to specifically address issues affecting adult learners.

The Transformative Learning Process

As suggested by Mezirow (1991), transformative learning in terms of the process by which new knowledge is either created or existing knowledge is re-affirmed, is brought about by a process of reflection, interaction and socialisation of ideas based on that learning. This process, according to Mezirow (1991), is pertinent to adult learners as they engage in the learning environment having deeply embedded assumptions and preconceptions of the world around them, and their position within

it. Through a process of learning whereby these existing assumptions are challenged, reflected upon and tested with others, new knowledge is created or existing preconceptions and assumptions are reinforced. Pedagogical designs within the learning environment, support this process and the role of the tutor or lecturer becomes one of facilitator, moving beyond what Freire (1972) terms the banking model of education to active participation by all those involved in the learning process. This pedagogical approach supports the liberation of minds (hooks, 1994) and emancipates all who participate. Subsequent learning theories have developed from the work of Mezirow, who has been criticised for neglecting to recognise the wider sociological, psychological and philosophical influences on the learning process (Jarvis, 2006). Nonetheless, the overarching concepts that present the learning process as a cyclical process of reflection, interaction and socialisation have remained largely intact.

The Application of Transformative Learning Theory to Practice

Applying transformative learning theory to support adult learners returning to learning is demonstrated through the case study within which this article is located. The case study institution is a large global provider of distance learning based in the UK. It has a social justice mission to support all students, whatever their background, to have access to HE and be successful once there. The challenge for the case study institution is that it operates an open entry policy, meaning there are no entry requirements. Students (the majority of whom are adults, over 25) can embark on an HE qualification without having a formal qualification to their name. It is therefore essential that academic study skills are embedded throughout its curriculum, and students get the right level of support required, when they need it. Its core undergraduate modules have academic study skills embedded throughout its curriculum and front-loaded within the first-year programme to ensure students are equipped to progress successfully onto their subsequent years' studies. The pedagogical design mirrors Mezirow (1991), Jarvis (2006) and Illeris' (2017) models of learning, in terms of supporting critical thinking, reflection and interaction with other students within tutorials and forums and also directly with their tutor through the assessment process. Where perhaps the pedagogical design differs from these models is specifically in terms of the level at which interaction and socialisation occurs. The approach to tuition adopted by the case study institution is one whereby most tutorials are delivered online, at scale, with one tutor potentially leading a tutorial of 70 students. Students may not know the tutor who is running their tutorial, and it is also likely that they will not know their fellow students with whom they may need to interact. This poses a challenge if the concept of active participation and collective consciousness is to be realised, placing more of the emphasis of reflection, interaction and socialisation at an individual rather than group level. The extent to which Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy (whilst not used directly as Freire intended within the concept of HE at the case study institution) can truly be re-enacted in this environment, is questionable. There is a risk that the pedagogical design, within this context reverts back to one whereby the expert tutor imparts their knowledge and expertise upon expectant recipients.

Some students who engage in study with the case study institution, take the decision to embark on an entry level module prior to their formal participation on an undergraduate programme. The pedagogical design for these modules is specific to the objectives of developing individual confidence and a sense of 'HE is for me' (Archer, 2007) as well as academic skills development. Both are considered by educational developers within the case study as essential for enabling positive transformations within the individuals. The aim is that this positive transformation will enable students to confidently continue on their academic journey, as well as equip them with the skills and competencies to actively participate within the domains of work and society.

The Case Study

The case study within which this research is positioned is adult learners who were studying on the first year of their degree programme, having previously studied one of the case study institution's pre-entry Access modules. The institution is a large global provider of HE by distance learning, based

in the UK. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study through a mix of online content delivery, online tutorials, informal forums and some face-to-face tutorials. Students are allocated one tutor whose primary function is to provide academic study support. Non-compulsory tutorials are delivered online and largely at scale, with students being led by a tutor, who may not necessarily be their allocated tutor. Students do not necessarily know their fellow students in these tutorials and generally rely on the group tutor to structure the tutorials and engage students.

   Some tutorials are also delivered in person. These tutorial groups tend to be much smaller, although similar to the online group tutorials, and may not be delivered through a student's allocated tutor. These face-to-face tutorials are generally held in central locations, meaning some students have to travel quite a way to attend.

   As part of its commitment to support students to be successful in their studies, the case study institution also offers a bespoke programme of study, its Access programme, aimed and developing individual confidence and academic study skills. The case study institution does not have any entry qualifications, meaning that programmes designed to support students who may have had poor previous experiences of education and want to give HE a try, are pivotal to students' continuing success. Engagement with the institution's Access programme is not compulsory but institutional data suggest that students who complete an Access programme do better than students who do not. At the time of writing, three inter-disciplinary Access modules are offered by the institution. The modules are entry level 0 and have no academic credit attached to them. They cover a 30-week period and are unique in that students are allocated a one-to-one tutor who supports them throughout the duration of the module, offering one to one telephone tutorials on a monthly basis. The pedagogical model is designed to be developmental in nature, with formative assessment aimed at building confidence in assessment tasks and within students more generally. Table 1 summarises the pedagogic design of both the first-year undergraduate modules and the entry level modules within the context of transformative learning theory and associated models of learning.

Table 1

A pedagogical framework for adult learners returning to learning within the context of transformative learning theory and models of learning

1. What is being learned?	2. Why is it being learned?	3. How is it being learned?	4. What is the impact of the learning?	5. Existing introductory courses at the case study institution
Illeris (2017) • Knowledge • Understanding • Skills	Illeris (2017) • Incentive Mezirow (1991) • Disorienting dilemma Jarvis (2006) • Situation • Experience	Freire (1972) • Critical pedagogy using experience or new content to challenge existing assumptions, making sense of new situations Mezirow (1991) • Relating discontent to others • Explaining options of new behaviour • Experimenting with new roles • Jarvis (2003) • Reasoning and reflection • Evaluation • Practice/experimentation Illeris (2017) • Action • Communication • Co-operation	Jarvis (2006) • Reinforcement of existing assumptions • New learning which creates a change within the individual Mezirow (1991) • Building confidence in new ways • Reintegration	Access Programme • Assessment is developmental • Interdisciplinary • Study skills development embedded within pedagogical model • Self-reflection exercises at start of module • Tutor provides one-to-one pastoral support • Regular telephone tutorials integral to the pedagogical model to provide academic and pastoral support • No formal contact with other students • Short modules to maintain motivation First year of undergraduate studies • Study skills development embedded within pedagogical model • Peer interaction through informal module forums as well as tutor-led tutorials • Modular-based study

Researcher Positionality and Limitations of the Research

It is important to acknowledge the author's own position within the context of this research. It is difficult to detach their positionality, coming from the perspective whereby engaging in HE has positive benefits to individuals, with the mission of the case study institution and specifically the Access programme. It is also difficult to separate the author's professional practice within the context of the research. As someone who inhabits the space where educational policy meets institutional practice, there is already a preconceived idea of what the case study does or does not do in terms of transformative learning. In this sense, the author holds a unique and powerful position to work with the participants in the research, in order to support the development of programmes that support their personal and professional beliefs. The research therefore does not pretend to be objective, but positively embraces the unique position of the researcher.

Methodology

The research sought to explore the experiences of adult learners as they return to learning in a formal HE environment. Its particular focus was on how those experiences, and the pedagogical design, impact the personal transformations that occur when adult learners return to HE via a dedicated widening participation programme. In order to gain insight into the richness of participant stories (Wang, 2013), a qualitative approach using one to one interviews was adopted. Telephone interviews were undertaken with 23 adult learners between the ages of 21 and 59. An initial pilot study revealed different issues for students who had only recently left formal education as well as for students aged 60 and over. The main study selected a sample of students between the ages of 25 and 59, although all participants' data was included in the data analysis and findings.

Although age was a consideration within the sample design, other variables were also included in the selection process, reflecting the particular concept around widening participation to HE, within which the study was being based. Out of all the students studying at the case study institution, the sample was developed using the following criteria:

- Less than 2 A levels
- POLAR3[1] quintiles 1 and 2
- Aged between 25 and 59
- Studied an Access module prior to the first year of their degree
- In receipt of a full fee waiver on the Access programme

Participants were invited to participate in the research through a series of email invitations using a stratified sampling process to ensure an equal opportunity to be invited to participate across the whole sample, also split by gender. In total, 133 students were invited to participate, 87 females and 46 males. Out of this, 23 students agreed to participate and were invited to engage with the researcher in a one-to-one interview.

Due to the dispersed nature of participants, interviews were undertaken by telephone, at a time convenient to the participants. Non-face-to-face methods of data collection can pose challenges to qualitative researchers in the sense that they can create a barrier to developing a rapport between researcher and participant (Holt, 2010). Subsequently this could impact on how participants engage with the interview process, the level of detail they are willing to share and the level of probing by the researcher. The introduction of new media platforms such as Skype or Facetime have the potential to overcome some of these barriers and participants were given the choice of engaging with the interviews via these platforms. All participants opted for a telephone interview possibly due to their experience of distance learning within the case study institution, in which telephone tutorials were the dominant form of contact during their introductory studies. Interviews were recorded and transcribed

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[1] POLAR3 – Participation of Local Areas – a postcode-based measure of the likelihood of 18/19 year olds attending university.

with participants' consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research up to the point at which data was aggregated. They were assured that they would not be identifiable in the research and pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity.

The Use of Vignettes

During the piloting phase of the research it became clear that traditional approaches to interviewing were not providing the level of insight expected. This may have been as a result of the sensitive and complex nature of some of the questions being asked (Neff, 1979), acknowledging that for some participants the recollection of their past experiences of education may expose anxieties that could be traumatic. The decision was made to use vignettes as a way of transferring the power of the research from the researcher to the participant (Stravakou and Lozgka, 2018), enabling participants to identify their own experiences from within the vignettes, that were shared with them prior to the telephone conversation. The vignettes were developed from the existing literature on widening participation to HE for underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds alongside findings from the pilot study. Their use was pivotal in engaging participants in often very deep and personal conversations about their previous and current experiences of education.

Vignette A focused on a student who worked in a supermarket, with parents in low skilled occupations. They felt neglected at school by their teachers and perceived themselves to not be as clever or as academic as their peers. They felt they received little support from their teachers in this respect, made worse by receiving extra sessions which pulled them out of the main class for everyone to see. There was no expectation for these students to go beyond compulsory education and very unlikely that they would achieve many, if any, formal qualifications.

Vignette B presented a student who did quite well at school but, despite wanting to, was unable to continue their formal education beyond the age of 18. Although the student in Vignette B embarked and was quite successful in a career, they also perceived themselves to be less valued within the workplace, and decisions or feedback on key initiatives were directed towards more educated colleagues. This began to erode the confidence of the student in Vignette B and their own ability to make decisions independently. This not only played out in the workplace but began to encroach on their personal life too.

Finally Vignette C presented a scenario where the student had a very poor school and homelife. They were not encouraged by their parents in any aspect of their life and were left to their own devices in all aspects of their lives. They felt neglected by their teachers which contributed to a lack of confidence in the classroom, exacerbated by how they perceived themselves to be amongst their peers. Feelings of negativity were reinforced through news stories of crime and disorder being prevalent in areas with which the student could identify. The student within Vignette C had no experiences of positivity in any aspect of their life.

Using evidence that suggests consideration should be made of the length, language and tone used in vignettes (Stravakou and Lozgka, 2018), the final versions were sent to participants prior to their interview. Participants were asked to read each one and select the one that most resonated with their experience. They were encouraged to develop their own vignette, combining specific aspects of each one, with another. The vignettes were used as the introductory conversation for the interview, acting as an icebreaker, often immediately breaking down the barriers between researcher and participant (Barter and Renold, 2000; Sundaram and Wilde, 2011).

The Interviews

The vignettes were specifically focused on the learning experiences of participants prior to engaging with the case study institution. Subsequent questions were identified within an interview schedule which were introduced during the discussion of the vignettes and as the interview progressed. These questions probed the participant further in terms of their experiences as they began their journey back into formal education. Participants were asked about how they felt as they registered to study on the introductory module, why they chose this particular route and what support

they received as they began the process. They were asked questions in terms of their experience as their studies continued and how they managed their insecurities as they progressed. Broader questions were also available to use to gain deeper insight into participant stories if the previous questions were limiting. These broader questions related to wider experiences that they thought may have been relevant in relation to their transformational journey and how their experience of returning to study has prepared them for further study. They were also invited to talk about how their studies have impacted other aspects of their life outside of the formal learning environment.

Findings

The Process of Transformative Learning

Prior to the research being undertaken, it was already acknowledged that student experiences as they returned to learning at the case study institution were transformative. This was even more evident for those who began their studies with an Access module. Student testimonies used more widely across the institution support this. The findings from this research not only reinforced, but expanded on this belief, by hearing the accounts of participants and the journeys they travelled even before they embarked on undergraduate study at the case study institution.

Turning now to participant responses to the research questions, Adam recounts the impact of the support and encouragement given to him by his grandparents as he overcame severe depression and agoraphobia since leaving school early. Gently easing Adam back into society through his involvement in his grandfather's charity, Adam slowly began to develop confidence in himself. Interactions with others, on his first few visits to the charity were non-existent, but slowly and surely over time they grew. In reflecting on his decision to re-enter formal education he acknowledges the contribution the passing of his grandfather had, in his own words "I wanted to give something back to my grandad and for him to feel proud of me."

For Lee, similarly in response to questions regarding his decision to engage with formal education, he spoke about his employment in a factory. Having always been made to feel stupid at school by both the teachers and other pupils, his engagement with a maths course as part of his work was predominantly down to him wanting to get out of work for a few hours, rather than a desire to learn. Despite this, the results he achieved on the course amazed him and with the continued support of a colleague, he began to develop an inner confidence that eroded the negative feelings that he had held regarding education and his position within it for a long time. He progressed from a maths course to a literacy course. This was the turning point in his life as his tutor referred him for an assessment which resulted in a diagnosis of dyslexia. It was obvious during the conversation with Lee, what this meant to him.

> [F]inding out I was dyslexic actually; it changed a lot for me because when she actually told me, I'm a bit embarrassed, but I actually sobbed, I cried my eyes out.

Jill had a similar experience although she had a clearer idea of the career she wanted, a social worker. However, as with Lee, she struggled with core subjects. Despite gaining a distinction in a BTEC diploma, she failed maths and English which prevented her from going to university. Freddie had a similar experience to Jill in terms of career ambitions. He wanted to join the Royal Marines but at 16, his parents said he was too young and needed to wait until he was 18. A Saturday job in a bakery, evolved into an apprenticeship and he never fulfilled his desire to be a marine.

The transformative process for Gary was equally powerful to that of Lee, and responded to some of the broader questions that were asked in relation to the support that he received. He recalls a lack of interest by his mother in all aspects of his life which eventually resulted in him leaving the family home at the age of 14. He spent the next six months living in a barn, able to maintain his attendance at school until the winter set in. He was taken in by his auntie but forced to leave education to contribute to his living costs. Gary's journey back into formal education was turbulent. He joined the army to find the family that he did not have, but then turned to drink and became violent as a result of the many horrors that he saw. Although recognising that something had to change, it was

his partner who began his personal transformation, supporting him to seek professional help to overcome his addictions. It was at this point that he began the search to reengage in formal education, with the belief of the people around him that it was possible. Gary's journey was not a linear process however and it took a long time for him to eventually embark on the Access programme at the case study institution and subsequently continue onto an undergraduate qualification.

Melanie's experience was similar to Gary's in terms of the impact of her homelife. However, where Gary continued his education despite being homeless, Melanie withdrew from both homelife and education. She recalls one or two teachers who were supportive of her but the majority of them wrote her off. Melanie's experience of school and home resulted in her being off long-term sick. When she returned to school her friendship group had moved on and she spoke of how she did not feel she belonged in any group. She acknowledges that this experienced "messed her up until her mid-twenties" and relied on colleagues within her work for the support to keep her positive.

For some of the other participants in this research the transformative process was perhaps more subtle, having left school following poor experiences in relation to bullying by their peers, and a lack of support by their teachers. On reflecting on their school experience and the journey back into formal education, Julie suggested that her experience at school did not affect her as she returned to learning, despite her being bullied and a lack of support from the school. In response to questions about wider support she recalled her mother as being pivotal in terms of engaging with the school but that only one or two teachers were really there to help her. As a result of this experience Julie left school without any formal qualifications. As is also evident in Maureen's recollection of her school experience, financial barriers prevented progression to formal learning beyond compulsory education, rather than any issues relating to confidence brought about by school experience. Similarly, Kirsty and Mya always had a sense that they would go onto formal education at some point in their life. Kirsty lived in a very rural part of the South East of England, her motivation was to move to a more vibrant area of the country. In order to achieve this ambition, she tried college and university but withdrew quite early on in her studies.

Certain situations in Mya's life (which she did not wish to elaborate on) prevented her from following her ambitions to go to university. For Miles, whilst he admits that he was quite academic within his school, the career trajectory being imposed upon pupils was either to go to university or the army, neither of which he wanted. He referred to himself as "a vacuum child" whereby his needs were not being met due to the priorities within the school. This was a similar experience to Gary and other participants such as Sally, Jane and Lesley who felt that they were ignored if they either were not the most academic, were average, or were not aligned to the school's ambitions. Lindsey's misalignment was not necessarily with the school although she does make the point that she felt like she was being treated like a child in sixth form. Her father was keen for her to have a university career but whilst she has subsequently thought that she should have gone to university, at that point in time it was not for her.

Julie and Kirsty's experiences confirm the different trajectories that participants experienced, which for some were severely impeded by their previous experiences of education whilst for others the impact of their schooling was less evident. Jenny revealed her distrust of other students and colleagues in the workplace as a result of the relationship she had with her friends at school, who were also her abusers. She admits that whilst professionally she finds it quite easy to create distance between her colleagues and herself, it is harder within other social settings but proactively takes steps to avoid opening herself up to the situations that she faced at school. Her return to learning is transformative in many ways as she was able to continue her ambitions to study for a degree, which were curtailed due to her negative experiences at school. However, as shall be seen, the pedagogic design within the case study institution that aims to continue the transformative learning process is perhaps not conducive to Jenny's preferred environment.

Transformative Learning

Pedagogic Design

The accounts that participants gave provide the context within which they re-engaged with formal education. The diversity of experience is evident as are the experiences, strengths and anxieties that participants brought to their Access studies. For some to arrive in that position has meant a phenomenal transformation personally and academically, whilst for others the evidence may be less obvious. Despite this every participant was able to share the impact that studying the Access programme has had on them, specifically in relation to its pedagogic design.

Here, we would expect Mezirow's transformative learning theory to be evident, alongside the subsequent models of learning developed by Jarvis and Illeris. What the research revealed, however, reflects the individual journeys and circumstances that participants brought to the learning environment (Waller, 2006). Whereas Mezirow's framework provides the conditions within which adult learners can question, challenge and reframe their existing assumptions within constructive dialogue, the conditions within which students on an Access programme study are potentially one step removed from this process.

Tutorial Structure

Participants recalled a variety of experiences as they returned to study. For some, the one-to-one tutorial structure on the Access programme was pivotal to their continuing transformative learning journey. Donna recalls the proactive engagement by her tutor on the Access programme which she said really helped her to maintain enthusiasm and motivation to study, particularly as she is not confident in actively seeking support. Angela, Julie and Sally also spoke very highly of their tutors on the Access programme particularly in terms of how accessible they were to respond to their queries and concerns. Alison, and Jen spoke positively of the engagement and support they had with their undergraduate tutors. This was not always evident as they continued her studies, as the tutorial structure on the undergraduate programme was considered to be less personal and generally delivered through larger group environments. Lee had mixed experiences on the undergraduate programme as he had a change of tutor partway through his module which revealed to him the different tutoring styles that were difficult for him to adapt to. Angela recalled a lack of input from her tutor apart from providing her feedback on assignments which is a significant departure from the experience she had on the Access programme. Louise, Melanie and Lee also spoke of a lack of support from their tutors as they progressed beyond the Access programme, suggesting a gap in transition to personal transformation which is perhaps not quite as linear a process as the pedagogical design infers. For some participants such as Jenny, however, this development was welcomed as she considers herself to be an independent learner, proactively seeking support when required but generally preferring to be 'left alone'. Assuming that all students on the undergraduate are confident to be proactive in contacting their tutors rather than enabling more proactive tutor support within the pedagogical design is problematic. This is particularly important for students who are less likely to raise their hand or come forward with questions, and speaks to the type of student widening participation programmes are often aimed at.

The varied experiences of participants in this research suggests a lack of consistency in approach to tutoring beyond the Access programme. It was evident amongst all participants, irrespective of the confidence they felt at any particular time in their learning journey, that certain triggers could begin to resurface their anxieties and apprehensions, potentially impacting their continued journey through HE and eroding the transformative learning that they had developed. This is exacerbated for some students who recognised the need for more developmental support as they progress their undergraduate studies. The current model potentially exposes some participants to situations that resurrect their anxieties and perceptions of inadequacy whilst enabling others to thrive in this environment.

Online Tutorials and Fora

For some participants, the online tutorial environment and informal fora that they could engage with, enabled anonymity which gave them the confidence to present their ideas on an equal footing to their peers. This was particularly the case for Adam, whose history included severe agoraphobia and depression. His renewed confidence and enthusiasm to present his own ideas and challenge others was evident, clearly reflecting the overarching aims of the Access programme to enable confident progression to the next level of study. Alison also spoke positively about her online tutorial experience, particularly the benefit of having two tutors in the tutorial, one to answer questions that were appearing in the chat and the other talking through the tutorial material. Similarly Sally felt that the online environment was a safer environment to express views and opinions anonymously, which could be filtered by the tutors or presented slightly differently so as not to directly say to a student that something was not relevant.

For others, however, their engagement within these environments was less of a positive experience, preferring the one-to-one tutorial method they had experienced on the Access programme irrespective of whether it was online or not. The online environment was particularly challenging for Lee who had struggled with reading and writing at school and, despite his dyslexia diagnosis, was still wary of writing anything within these environments for fear of looking stupid or making spelling mistakes. However, the experience recalled by Sally above, whereby comments were anonymous and could be filtered, could help to overcome some of Lee's concerns. Other participants felt a slight apprehension of contributing, with some more comfortable in observing what others were saying without actively participating themselves. This challenges Mezirow, Jarvis and Illeris in terms of the need for interaction between individuals although what level of interaction is perhaps not as clearly defined, meaning that just observing interactions with others may equally contribute to the transformative learning process. No peer-to-peer contact was positive for Jenny, enabling her to engage with the learning environment in the way that suited her best.

Other more practical challenges were also identified by participants in the research particularly around being able to access the technology to enable them to participate in the online environment. This was less about how the tutorial was delivered and more about access to a laptop with the correct software, as in Miles' experience or the ability to participate fully because of a hearing impairment which Louise identified as a reason for her preference for face-to-face tutorials. However, Alison found the experience really positive as she recalls being able to screen shot particular aspects of the tutorial and paste into a Word document so that she was able to capture much more of the content of the tutorial. Alison and Donna also recalled the productivity of the online environment in terms being able to get through a lot more material than in a face-to-face environment.

There were also mixed experiences in terms of engaging in face-to-face tutorials, which for some contributed to their transformational learning journey, whilst for others it was more challenge. Apart from the challenges of physically attending a face-to-face tutorial in terms of location and timing (Miles Melanie, Gary), participants spoke about conversations being dominated by those people with the biggest voices or the session being interrupted as students put their hands up to ask questions. In this sense the online tutorial potentially becomes a more equitable experience (if the technology permits), enabling the tutor to filter questions and responses in a timely way but ensuring all students have the opportunity to participate in a manner that suits them. In turn this contributes to the process of transformation which occurs at different points in time for different students.

Relationship with Tutors

The learning experience in relation to the tutorials, structure and tutors, was enhanced when students and their tutors found common ground, whether that related to backgrounds or circumstance. This was evident as Louise recalls a conversation with her tutor whereby it became apparent that he used a walking stick, as did she. For her, this immediately broke down barriers that are often evident in a teacher/student relationship, supporting Freire's concept of active participation within the learning environment. For others, however, the one-to-one tutoring model was difficult, whether that was due to a clash of personality as perceived by Gary or generally in relation to the perception of the student as to what the tutor expects of them (Lee). Jenny found the structure of the Access programme slightly restrictive. Happy to study on her own, she felt confident in being able to ask for help if needed but did not feel she needed tutorials to be scheduled in so rigidly. This impacted her relationship with her tutor in some ways, which may have been more productive if Jenny had been left to be more independent. However, she does acknowledge that without the support of her tutors she would have given up; as she said "a little bit of support and encouragement keeps her going, reinforcing the message that "she can do it". Angela referred to a "virtual hug" that kept her motivated.

Seeking support from tutors also played out in relation to assessment, not only in preparing for assessment tasks, but also in receiving and responding to feedback. There were mixed experiences of participants in relation to the support they received from their tutor in preparing to submit their assignments. Alison and Melanie both spoke about more guidance required in terms of what some of the language used in assessment means, which they felt they did not get from their tutor but was equally missing in Open University material. They spoke about a need for greater development in relation to academic writing or forming an argument as they progressed onto the undergraduate programme. Whilst some students like Louise and Sally felt comfortable in approaching their tutors because of the relationship they had built up, for others this was more problematic. The discrepancy between the approaches that tutors took was less apparent on the Access programme as the one-to-one model is embedded within its pedagogical design, but it was clear that inconsistency of tutor approaches left students confused about what was expected. This has the potential to resurface some of the anxieties presented from their school experience and, as in Lee's case, begin the process of questioning whether they belong within this academic environment. Lee submitted one assignment having received 80% in his previous one. He received 40% for the most recent submission but the feedback he received did not give any indication of where he had dropped marks. Having renewed confidence to challenge, he queried the feedback with his tutor but received no response. At the time of the research he was still waiting for a reply, but it was clear from the conversation that he was beginning to doubt himself and his ability.

Programme Design

The accounts provided by participants in this study reveal the heterogeneity of adult learners as they re-engage in formal education (Michie, Glachan and Bray, 2001; Waller, 2006). They demonstrate the unique and individual experience of adult learners who have followed varied pathways to arrive at the same destination, in HE. The impact of their previous experiences of education, whilst not buried, have slowly been addressed through initial support provided by peers, colleagues, friends and family, to formal support as the progress into HE. The experiences of the students in this study reveal that for some, the impact of their previous experiences are potentially ready to resurface should the conditions in their learning environment reignite some of their feels of insecurity. In general, studying the Access programme enabled a level of confidence to be developed through its unique one to one telephone tutoring model. Despite this not being a preferred tutoring learning for some participants, for others is was essential to give them the personalised support that they needed. The wider pedagogic design of the Access programme, however, was perceived as positive by all participants in terms of its developmental and nurturing nature. In many ways this compensated for any negative feelings experienced through the tutoring model.

Whilst for some participants in this study, this initial introduction to the HE learning environment was sufficient to enable them to positively continue with their undergraduate studies. The pedagogy within the core undergraduate programmes is designed to enable the flexibility to study at a time, place and pace that suits the individual. Some participants in the study reported this was a step too far, and it is evident that a more supportive transition into undergraduate studies was required. Moving from an individualised tutoring model to group tuition is one example of this disparity between the two programmes and in consistency between the support received from individual tutors was also raised as an issue for some students. However, participants did not make reference to the overall design of the programme whereby much of the subject content is delivered either online or through printed textbooks. Wider support to reinforce the subject content or acknowledge individual circumstances, therefore, could be enhanced to create a better learning experience for some students. This reflects the individual experiences that participants reported and supports the argument that adult learners are not homogenous. Pedagogic designs within core undergraduate programmes should reflect this and recognise that for some students, particularly those to whom widening participation is aimed, a more supportive and personalised learning environment is likely to be more effective.

Conclusions

The research presented in this article has explored, through the voices of adult learners in HE, the extent to which pedagogical models support their transitions into and through HE. Positioned within Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the study has provided insight into the impact that bespoke programmes to support adult learners into HE have on personal transformations. It highlights some of the challenges that adult learners battle with, which different pedagogical designs can either help to overcome or exacerbate.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory helps us to understand the process by which adults either increase their knowledge within different contexts or reinforce their existing assumptions. The process of interaction, reflection, socialisation and affirmation are supposedly easy concepts to engage with, through the active dialogue between all those involved in the learning process. For adult learners coming into a HE environment, many having had poor experiences of education, this process can be problematic. Whilst Mezirow's theory has been expanded to include wider psychological, sociological and physiological influences (Jarvis 2006; Illeris, 2017), the influence of pedagogical design within an educational environment, is of equal importance in supporting the personal transformations that occur in adult learners. This personal transformation occurs at different points in time of an adult learner's educational journey. Whilst the implementation of transformative learning theory may support adult learners at the latter stages of this personal transformative process, for those at the beginning of their journey or those that move between different transformative phases, this approach may not be appropriate. Transformational elasticity creates the conditions for which adult learners can thrive or withdraw, depending on the learning environment and pedagogical models that they are exposed to.

Bespoke programmes, such as the Access programme cited in this article, aim to address some of the shortfall that transformative learning theory presents although even then, the pedagogical design that aims to develop individuals to become confident learners may contribute to increased anxiety. However, the individual journeys that participants in this research shared suggest that despite some triggers being apparent, the overarching pedagogical design supports their transformative learning process. If the pedagogical models within the programmes of study adult learners move onto are too far removed from the original experience however, some students may find that the initial transformative benefits gained through specific widening participation programmes are eroded. Pedagogical design should be inclusive, ensuring that individual needs can be met in a timely way, recognising that some students will be less confident in reaching out for support or engaging within the learning environment and that others may need to dip in and out of support throughout their educational journey.

This is not, however, the beginning of the story. The transformative learning process and subsequent personal transformations that occur are emerging prior to formal engagement in learning and without the structure that Mezirow's theory places on the process. There is potentially a need for a similar process, theory or framework to be developed, reflective of the more informal interactions that begin early on in an adult learners' educational journey. This could be challenging given the individualised nature of experiences but nonetheless would enable the bigger picture relating to adult learners as they embark on their journey back to formal learning to be presented.

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