Diversity and achievement: Is success in higher education a transformative experience?

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This paper reports on a longitudinal project examining how a group of students from diverse backgrounds succeeded in higher education. The project explored participants' pathways into higher education, how they managed their studies, and their reflections at course completion. In this paper, the concept of perspective transformation is used to consider the extent to which their success in higher education was a transformative experience. Data from the project's first stage identified the role of perspective transformation in influencing participants' pathways to higher education, while here we focus on the impact of their university study on perspective transformation, comparing evidence of transformative experiences during study with those that led to enrolment. Analysis of participants' reflections at course completion indicated that higher education success was a transformative experience for most of them and that perspective transformation affected more participants during study than before it. Participants identified several aspects of the course that contributed to the changes

experienced in their perspectives. We consider some implications for university staff, which may help others involved with students from diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: *Higher education, perspective transformation, transformative learning, student diversity, student success*

Introduction

In this paper we review the findings from a longitudinal project which investigated how a group of students from diverse backgrounds succeeded in higher education. We consider the extent to which successful study was a transformative experience for the students involved. A previous analysis of participants' comments from the first phase of this project explained their pathways into higher education and suggested that for some, the decision to enrol was not primarily the outcome of perspective transformation, but a response to other life experiences (Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos & Crosling, 2010). This paper aims to establish whether the study experience itself had a greater impact on perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978) than the changes in participants' lives which led to their enrolment, and to consider implications of the findings for university staff.

Understanding the role of perspective transformation, among other factors that contribute to higher education success, is relevant as higher education moves beyond massification to universal access (Trow, 2000). In Australia, impetus was provided by the Federal Government's response to the Bradley higher education review (Bradley, 2008) which included 'an ambition that by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at the undergraduate level will be of people from a low SES background' (Australian Government, 2009:13). A further ambition was 'to enrol and complete an additional 217,000 students at bachelor level or above by 2025, equating to 40 per cent of all 25 to 34 year olds' (p.44). Given the barriers to higher education which frequently need to be overcome for successful study, and the related changes in perspective that may be required, information about the role of perspective transformation is potentially important in guiding teaching, support and management strategies for positive study outcomes.

Project participants included students from low socio-economic groups, non-English-speaking and migrant backgrounds, regional and remote areas, students with medical conditions, and first generation university students. In this three-stage project, on-campus and off-campus participants at study commencement told their stories about their pathways into higher education. Then, while their studies were in progress, participants explained how they were managing. Finally, they reflected on their experiences at course completion (between two and four years after enrolment, depending on study mode and individual study patterns). This paper draws on findings from all stages of the project but particularly on participants' final reflections. The project, undertaken at an Australian university, adapted the research design of a similar project in the United Kingdom (Kirk, 2006).

In the following sections we explore the concept of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978) in the context of other concepts from higher education research, which may assist in understanding how students achieve successful outcomes. We then describe our research design and analyse participants' reflections on their higher education experience to identify the impact of successful study on perspective transformation, compared with its role in influencing their pathways to higher education. Finally, we discuss the outcomes of this analysis, focusing on implications for teaching and student support.

Conceptual background

Mezirow (1978) introduced the concept of perspective transformation to explain the fundamental perspective shift that occurs when individuals change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds. He originally saw perspective transformation as involving ten phases beginning with a single 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 1981), but later acknowledged that it could be a gradual, cumulative process (Mezirow, 2000).

In continuing to refine the theory, Mezirow (2000) conceptualised a frame of reference as comprising six dimensions of habits of mind (sociolinguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic, philosophical, psychological and aesthetic), each expressed as a point of view and each comprising a cluster of meaning schemes. Changes to a frame of reference involving

transformation of habits of mind and points of view usually occur through critical reflection and discourse. Critical theory (Brookfield, 2005) underpins Mezirow's theory though his focus was on the personal emancipatory aspects of perspective transformation in 'everyday life' (Mezirow, 1978), rather than on social justice and the relationship of knowledge, power and ideology more generally (Habermas, 1971).

Mezirow (2003:61) commented that '[t]esting the validity of a transformed frame of reference … requires critical-dialectical discourse', referring to discourse as dialogue involving a (rational) assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values. Earlier, Mezirow (1991) introduced three types of reflection (content, process and premise), identifying premise reflection as facilitating profound, emancipatory change through critical examination of problematic ideas, values, beliefs, and feelings and their underpinning assumptions, leading to testing of the transformed frame of reference through rational discourse. Although he moved away from the three types of reflection (Cranton, 2006), premise reflection continues to underpin the idea of critical reflection. Hence, if perspective transformation is central to successful higher education outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds, Mezirow's theory suggests that critical reflection would be pivotal.

Other contributions on aspects of transformative learning theory have included: keeping critical pedagogy central (Brookfield, 2003); acknowledging the roles of emotion and imagination in constructing meaning (Dirkx, 2001); and the need for a mature level of cognitive functioning for transformative learning to occur (Merriam, 2004). The importance of ways of knowing that extend beyond rational knowing was acknowledged in several empirical studies reviewed by Taylor (1997), along with the varying nature of the catalyst for perspective transformation (which may not always involve a disorientating dilemma), and the role of context and relationships. Acknowledging both Mezirow's rational approach and the extrarational approach of others who regard transformation as extending beyond cognitive ways of knowing, Cranton (2006:77) discussed whether rational and extrarational transformation can occur suddenly and dramatically, gradually over time, or as a developmental process, concluding that 'from the perspective of the person experiencing transformation, it is more often a gradual accumulation of ordinary experiences that leads

to a deep shift in thinking, a shift that may only become clear when it is over'. In this paper we consider that participants demonstrate transformative experiences if their successful study outcomes are related to a change in frames of reference based on critical reflection and discourse as defined by Mezirow, or extrarational processes.

Another recent idea in higher education for explaining the transformative nature of learning is the notion of threshold concepts where subject mastery 'can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something ... representing a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress ...', and which results in an irreversible shift in perception (Meyer & Land, 2006:3). In articulating this concept, resonances with Mezirow's theory were acknowledged and concerns about the rational and analytic nature of critical reflection as the primary driver expressed (Meyer, Land & Baillie, 2010). Nevertheless, much of the work on threshold concepts has differed from Mezirow's approach because it emphasises how students acquire disciplinary knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2006; Land, Meyer & Smith, 2008). While its application is broadening (e.g., Kutsar & Kärner, 2010), Mezirow's view of perspective transformation, with its critical theory foundations, appears to accommodate the wide range of transformative elements which may be relevant to the success of students from diverse backgrounds.

An important issue in identifying determinants of students' success in higher education is that perspective transformation may not necessarily be involved. We identified students' success by graduation, together with evidence of commitment to and satisfaction with study which suggested that it would contribute to changes in life direction. The concept of orientations to learning from higher education student learning research is relevant here. Beaty, Gibbs and Morgan (2005) described four key learning orientations (vocational, academic, personal and social) where for each the student's primary interest may be extrinsic (e.g., a vocational interest in obtaining a qualification), though intrinsic interest (which could involve perspective transformation) is also possible for the first three of these. Hence, success may be the result of strong extrinsic motivation, which does not involve perspective transformation. This is consistent with other concepts from student learning research,

which suggest that students may engage in deep, surface or strategic approaches to learning (e.g., Biggs, 1987; Entwistle, 2005). While deep approaches would be necessary for perspective transformation, as Race (2007:5) states, 'It can ... be argued that those learners who go far are the strategic ones, rather than the deep ones. It can be argued that they know *when* to adopt a deep approach, and when it is sufficient to adopt a surface approach.'

In this paper, we consider whether success was transformative, using concepts related to Mezirow's theory. Where perspective transformation has not occurred, ideas from student learning research may assist in explaining success. In either case, the findings have implications for teaching and student support approaches that are important for successful outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds.

Research design

The research design continued the approach of the earlier project stages, drawing on narrative inquiry to study experience as it is lived (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), recognising that 'understanding an individual's learning career depends crucially on understanding the wider biography within which it is located' (Tedder, 2007:26). This approach also supports a relational view of researcher and participant engagement (Pinnegar & Danes, 2007) that develops as students' stories unfold in a longitudinal project, resulting in a mutually constructed account of inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Brooks and Clark (2001) commented on the value of narrative for theorising transformative learning through moving from past to future; spanning psychological, social, cultural, and historical dimensions in content and form; and including cognitive, affective, spiritual and somatic dimensions. By listening to and engaging with students' voices as an integral aspect of emancipatory research (Corbett, 1998), the approach itself supports perspective transformation through critical reflection and discourse.

In this study, students entering the Bachelor of Social Work degree were invited to participate if they entered university via diverse pathways such as those noted earlier, or considered themselves as 'non-traditional' university students for another reason. As part of their degree, students complete two compulsory fieldwork placements where they are required

to work in an approved agency under the supervision of a qualified social worker. Participants told their stories at the three project phases during three semi-structured individual interviews, complemented by group meetings to explore factors contributing to their success. For each phase, interview questions were adapted to the Australian and institutional context from those used in the original study in the United Kingdom. Eleven participants (ten female and one male) completed the final interview when data collection ceased up to four years after course commencement.

Interviews were audio-taped, transcriptions provided to each participant for verification, and then analysed to identify common themes. The focus was on identifying evidence of barriers to, and enablers of, success, reflecting the project's aim (how students succeed). The explanation of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) illustrates its advantages for addressing this research question. They note its value as a flexible method, which can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches, with a theme capturing 'something important about the data in relation to the research question' which represents 'some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (p.82). Thus, we were able to record barriers to and enablers of success from participants' narratives to gain a 'rich thematic description' (p.83) of these factors and then subsequently consider these against the concepts of perspective transformation discussed earlier. Identification of themes was assisted by dialogue among members of the research team to achieve consensus.

At the final interview each participant reflected on how they viewed themselves as a learner prior to, during and after study. They commented on any changes they noticed (for example, in self-esteem, confidence, motivation and knowledge) and when and how they noticed these changes. Reflections included their most important learning experiences during the course and how their learning was best supported and developed. In the following section we consider evidence of perspective transformation based on these reflections. Participants are identified using pseudonyms that they chose.

The effects of the course on learner characteristics

Of the eleven participants, five (Alex Carole, Harriet, Lillian, Marie and

Virginia) were in their 40s. The others (Lam, Miranda, Rochelle, Sesh, Shannon and Zelin) were in their 20s or 30s.

Before the course

Participants expressed a range of views on their characteristics as learners prior to their studies. Some emphasised their limitations, but there were also indications of attributes, which subsequently contributed to success. Among the former, Marie, Virginia and Rochelle were particularly negative about their prior learner characteristics. Marie stated that she was 'a very poor learner ... [with] a lot of cognitive deficits'. While these deficits were related to a severe medical condition, she had been 'always lazy' in relation to learning, doing 'the minimum kind of work':

I wasn't inquisitive ... I just wanted to go out and have fun ... I just thought it was something other people told me that I had to learn just to get by, to get a job. It wasn't something that I initiated myself ...

Similarly, Virginia stated that she 'wasn't a very good learner' in that she 'wasn't motivated to stick with it', while Rochelle commented that she had no confidence in her ability to learn.

Two students from international backgrounds, Lam and Zelin, noted their passiveness as learners before the course. Lam commented that although she was 'a bit submissive and passive', she was also motivated to learn and willing to seek clarification while Zelin stated that 'in China we basically do what the lecturers say'. Shannon was similar, stating that he was always interested in learning but approached it by 'trying to absorb as much as possible'. Sesh was also 'really motivated to get out there and just absorb things'. She was 'open to anything' but also 'felt a bit arrogant about it all', later realising that being 'all high and mighty about it' was not helpful as it resulted in a superficial approach to learning. Lillian indicated her openness to learning but less obtrusively, through her interest in reading and sociology and 'the way changes come about'. She was not focused on learning because she had worked since she left school in Year 11, but commented that she 'probably learnt by watching other people in terms of life skills and also by 'sheer hard work ... [and] determination'.

Harriet and Miranda were the most confident learners prior to the course, in both cases because of previous study experiences. Harriet referred to herself as a 'semi-self-motivated and self-directed learner' but Miranda was unequivocal, stating:

....my confidence in learning was good. I considered myself an effective learner right through high school and I suppose I didn't really have a huge amount of self-doubt because I write well and I think I can wing my way through a bit ... I'd already done a university diploma and a university degree before I even started the social work degree so I'd already fairly well set myself as an adult learner...

During the course

All participants except Miranda reported changes as learners during the course. Miranda stated that there were no changes in her learning style, just increased knowledge, adding, 'I guess I've been pretty well set in the way that I study and that's what's working for me.'

Seven others commented on increases in confidence and self-esteem as the course progressed, though for Virginia and Rochelle apprehension continued for some time. As an off-campus learner, Virginia attributed her lack of confidence to the absence of feedback to indicate 'how am I doing'. Key points in developing her confidence were overcoming a failed assignment that 'really knocked me', experiencing 'the most fantastic placement' which provided a sense of 'this is where I'm supposed to be', and being offered the opportunity to study at honours level which gave 'affirmation that ...[I was] doing the right thing'. Rochelle stated that apprehension continued throughout the first year but passing assignments led to increasing confidence.

Lam and Zelin both noted how their increasing participation in learning changed them. For Zelin, 'speaking out' gave her confidence, but her placement experience was 'the most important thing' as she began to perceive herself as a social worker.

Alex Carole, Marie and Lillian also noted considerable changes in themselves as learners during the course. Alex Carole's sense of social justice increased as she 'began to feel more strongly about issues'. She noted the significance of her first placement in this, and how she had

'grown as a person' during the course: 'If my confidence hadn't grown over the first twelve months I would have thought, "Just drop out…"'. Like Virginia, her response to failing an assignment made her '[s]urprised that I'm so persistent'. Marie found the course 'such a shock to my system' and was 'overwhelmed by the workload' but was 'very motivated', 'very directed' and noticed that her 'learning curve just went through the roof'. She began to think 'yeah, I'm a person of value' as she contributed to class discussion. By the end of the first year she had become 'more succinct', 'more eloquent' and 'more aware … so it was a real consciousness raising'. Lillian also referred to shock in her initial reaction to university: 'it was just such a shock that I got there … I was crying as I drove into uni because I was just so overwhelmed and proud.' As the course progressed, she realised that she 'was an organised person' who 'loved learning' and became a 'more rounded person' as she engaged with social issues.

The other three participants referred to changes in themselves as learners in different ways. Harriet, who began the course confidently and became increasingly successful, found that 'my anxiety level actually increased'. After her early 'arrogance', Sesh quickly realised that '[y]ou've just got to get focused in on what you're actually doing'. As assignment feedback told her 'you could have done more', she recognised that 'I obviously hadn't done the work that I could have done' and thought, 'I can do this if I get serious about it.' Her first placement was also significant in that it 'sort of woke me up a bit' and her motivation 'just went through the roof'. As her learning 'solidified', she became 'really passionate' and persistent, recognising the benefits of working collaboratively. Shannon's learning approach also matured as he moved from 'trying to absorb as much as possible' to 'let[ting] learning come more naturally'. Consequently, with increased confidence, 'I probably didn't devote as much time but still put the effort in to get what I needed out of it.'

After the course

Consistent with the above responses, all participants except Miranda indicated that their learner characteristics after the course were different from the beginning. Miranda repeated that she was already an established adult learner before the course, although she commented that 'you're a lot harsher as you get older … I'll cull out the things I don't

need and then wade through them to see what I can take.' She was also 'more confident in the workplace now because I have an entitlement to do certain things that I didn't have before'.

Comments by Lam, Rochelle, Sesh, Shannon and Zelin showed their learner maturity by the end of the course. Lam saw herself as a 'reflective learner' who was now 'very open to learning. A very proactive learner. I seek for clarifications and I also seek any criticism.' Zelin regarded herself as 'sort of like a researcher' because she had progressed to a Master's degree. Rochelle felt 'capable to learn to succeed' while Sesh was more aware of the need for depth. Shannon had become 'an easier learner, a more relaxed learner': 'I was able to integrate my learning more because I was better at my work as a social worker I think.'

Alex Carole, Harriet, Lillian, Marie and Virginia all noted the impact of their learning on their personal characteristics. Alex Carole learned that she was 'a good worker and can accept criticism as a learning process' and not take it too personally. The course gave her the skills 'to advocate on behalf of herself', which she could not do before. She was 'still learning' but her personal growth had been 'enormous': 'I look back now and think, WOW, you have come a long way, Alex Carole.'

Lillian felt pride in her achievements:

I'm proud of myself that I've been able to change my career at such a late stage in life and I guess I've learnt how determined I can be and if I say I'm going to do something, I'll do it.

Similarly, Virginia commented 'I could've walked away from it and I chose not to … [so] I sort of feel I took my own future into my own hands.' She noted the resulting empowerment, along with a growth in self-confidence 'in terms of my ability to learn' and an awareness of 'knowing how much I don't know'.

Harriet became '[a] more confident learner, an even more excited learner, a more directed learner', finding that the course 'actually finally provided a framework for my learning'. She became more assertive, and was empowered and validated by her qualification ('I feel fantastic; there are no boundaries for anyone'). Her anxiety disappeared. During the course she realised how 'it was impacting on … my identity' with

the result that 'really what I feel now is … a sense of wholeness and integration'.

The changes noted by Marie were also considerable:

*I'm a lot more independent as a learner. I was a very anxious learner…
I used to really underrate myself terribly, which was a real problem.
I used to think I was very inadequate. I don't feel I'm so inadequate
any more … Can you use the word cathartic? …because I recognised
in myself I can do things without panicking and I can be regarded as
a competent person and that's how I really want to be regarded … I've
always thought of myself as incompetent.*

When did changes occur?

Of the ten students who indicated change as learners during the course, most identified specific experiences. Only Lam and Rochelle suggested that the changes were predominantly gradual, with Rochelle commenting on developing confidence from passing assignments.

Harriet, Marie and Alex Carole referred to a combination of gradual change and specific experiences. Harriet noted the impact of course design and implementation, particularly the use of online groups so 'we were very socially connected', chunking of assignments into small components and getting 'a few marks fairly quickly', and lecturer support and encouragement. She felt that 'getting HDs [High Distinctions] … [is] a huge thing' and when she began to receive them 'the neat idea of having a string of HDs' was a 'pivotal moment' for her. When she was offered the opportunity to study at honours level and her supervisor told her ' you could be going on to do a PhD and you could get a scholarship', 'she really blew the top off my expectations' because 'that was just beyond imaging for me'. Although she moved 'back and forwards between believing that I could do that and believing that I couldn't', her supervisor's comments motivated her and when she won the prize for being 'the top honours student' she felt 'I can do all of those things now'.

For Marie, the gradual development of learner independence was punctuated by overcoming life obstacles, including her illness and her husband moving overseas for employment. Then, in her final year, her

marriage broke down and

… my son dropped out of uni … [with only] half a semester left of his music degree and he's just kind of doing nothing and my daughter is pretty shattered by the whole thing so there's a lot of grief and loss issues there for her as well as me.

Furthermore, she 'was just thrown in at the deep end' at her final placement with little supervision, and had to 'sink or swim'. Her successful completion resulted in the cathartic experience described earlier.

Alex Carole identified her first placement, the experience of living in Malaysia, failing a unit and overcoming family difficulties as change points:

[My] first placement was so significant – it was everything – the people, the clients, older people and so many different groups. Living in Malaysia for eighteen months as well I became more aware of disadvantage and society …

Failing her research unit, she recognised her drive to succeed ('it wasn't going to beat me') and she looked for another university to complete an equivalent unit. She did this successfully while overcoming legal problems related to her previous marriage and her father's death.

All other participants (Lillian, Sesh, Shannon, Virginia and Zelin) noted specific times or events, which made them recognise how they had changed. Like Alex Carole, Virginia's experience of overcoming failure which 'really knocked me … [and] almost made me want to give up' was a significant event, even though this related to a 'silly little assignment'. Other events included her 'fantastic' first placement that made her realise 'this is where I'm supposed to be', the affirmation of the opportunity to complete an honours degree and then overcoming the withdrawal of support by 'the organisation that was going to support my thesis' which required her to 'ditch the whole thing' and begin again. In this experience, the honours coordinator's support, the other students, and a visiting professor's encouraging comments were significant.

Receiving her honours offer was also an important point for Lillian:

… I suppose that was a recognition that I could actually study. I still think deep down I have this feeling that I'm not very bright so it always buffers up against that.

Then in her final year her mother's death 'just really rocked my world', making her realise that she could not take up the offer, resulting in a hard year of study:

I got through it just through sheer determination because I couldn't stop it. I certainly wasn't going to give it [the course] up after I got that close. I just knuckled down and did it.

Sesh, Shannon and Zelin referred to specific points in the course where recognition of how they had changed occurred. Sesh noted the feedback on her first assignment that made her realise its superficiality and the impact of her first placement which she again entered with 'cockiness' but which led to a more serious and motivated approach: 'from the placement I really … began to find my feet … about what I liked doing.' As a result she asked her parents to fund her attendance at a conference and was influenced by a person she met there as well as by an Oxford academic who contributed to the social work course. She considered that her two placements had a 'huge' impact on her. Also important was a bullying incident involving another student, which she experienced during the course. This challenged her 'to either quit or stay' and led to increased persistence.

Shannon attributed his recognition of how he had changed as a learner to a discussion with his course peers at the beginning of his third year. He also noted the impact of both placements. In the first, 'I took my learning into practice a little bit more' while the second 'really tied it together'. Zelin, too, noted the importance of both placements in linking theory and practice and also in changing her perception of herself. Also important were first year class discussions where she was encouraged to participate by her peers.

Factors that supported and developed learning during the course

Table 1 summarises the factors which participants stated supported and developed their learning during the course. While all identified the role of family and friends, other factors were directly related to the course

or university, except for the role of the workplace mentioned by Alex-Carole and Shannon and volunteer work identified by Marie.

Table 1: *Factors that supported and developed learning during the course*

Participants	Family /friends	Peers in course	First placement	Second placement	Feedback	Lecturers/ Tutors	Other aspects of course*	Additional factors**
Alex Carole	X	X	X		X			X
Harriet	X	X			X	X		
Lam	X	X			X		X	
Lillian	X				X			
Marie	X			X		X		
Miranda	X			X				
Rochelle	X					X	X	X
Sesh	X	X	X	X	X			X
Shannon	X	X	X	X				X
Virginia	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Zelin	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

*Other aspects of course: small classes (Lam and Zelin); reflective aspect of course (Lam); placements in general (Rochelle and Virginia)

**Additional factors: workplace (Alex-Carole and Shannon); language and learning support (Zelin); university resources (Rochelle); volunteer work (Marie); conference attendance (Sesh)

Is success in higher education a transformative experience?

In this section we consider the evidence of perspective transformation provided by the responses summarised above. Where perspective transformation appears to exist we discuss whether it resulted from a gradual experience or a disorienting dilemma and whether rational or extrarational factors were evident. We then compare the role of perspective transformation in influencing participants' pathways into higher education as previously reported (Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos & Crosling, 2010) with its role during the course. Then, in the following section, we suggest some ways that university staff could support the latter.

Comments about changes resulting from their study experience by all participants except Miranda suggest evidence of perspective transformation. Changes in how participants acquired and used knowledge indicate changes in epistemic habits of mind, but for Alex Carole, Harriet, Lillian, Marie and Virginia, changes in their self-perceptions also suggest impact on psychological habits of mind. These participants were also the oldest in the group (in their 40s) perhaps indicating increased impact when learning is undertaken later in life. Changes in epistemic habits of mind appear to be particularly related to rational processes (for example, when they involve class participation and reflection) but those relating to psychological habits of mind (such as Alex Carole's and Virginia's responses to overcoming failure) seem to involve extrarational processes.

Although Lam, Rochelle, Alex Carole, Harriet and Marie referred to gradual change, eight participants (including Alex Carole, Harriet and Marie) referred to specific change points. These events may be seen as disorienting dilemmas. They encompassed personal crises (Lillian and Marie), overcoming failure (Alex Carole and Virginia) and other transformative occurrences, including placement experiences.

In our prior analysis of participants' pathways to higher education (Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos & Crosling, 2010), we found evidence of perspective transformation before enrolment in the accounts of seven of the current participants, with Alex Carole, Marie and Sesh influenced by a disorientating dilemma and Harriet, Lillian, Rochelle and Shannon indicating gradual transformation of psychological habits of mind. The evidence of perspective transformation by all but one participant during the course appears to suggest that the experience of study success had a greater impact on perspective transformation than the events that led to enrolment. For those students who experienced changes in psychological as well as epistemic habits of mind, these changes had considerable impact. For example, Harriet stated:

… the … thing that's been incredibly powerful about this course is that I have found my path in a huge way. The whole course has just been transforming for me, astonishing and transforming …

Comments such as this, along with others that convey a profound psychological (emotional) component in transformation, provide

support for evidence of its extrarational aspects, though they frequently exist alongside (rational) critical reflection associated with Mezirow's explanation of perspective transformation. Amongst the range of course experiences, those (such as placements) that appeared to have a powerful impact on learners beginning to perceive themselves as social workers, may be more likely to involve critical reflection and discourse. They also recall the irreversible shift in perception associated with the idea of threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2006), which is relevant to how students acquire disciplinary knowledge. However, as indicated earlier, a broader conceptualisation of perspective transformation that can encompass the various developments of Mezirow's theory and has its foundations in critical theory, is probably more useful for accommodating the range of transformative elements which may be relevant to the success of students from diverse backgrounds. Nevertheless, the idea of threshold concepts remains useful when the focus is specifically on course-related aspects of success.

While higher education success appeared to involve transformative experiences for most participants, Miranda's responses suggest that perspective transformation is not necessary for success. Using the concept of orientations to learning (Beaty, Gibbs & Morgan, 2005), Miranda's experience indicates that success may result from strong extrinsic motivation that does not involve perspective transformation. Comments such as 'I guess I've been pretty well set in the way that I study and that's what's working for me' and 'I cull out the things I don't need and then wade through them to see what I can take' illustrate a strategic learning approach (Race, 2007) that is not transformative. Nevertheless, Miranda was successful in terms of the way we defined it in this study: she graduated from the course and showed evidence of commitment to and satisfaction with study which suggested that it would contribute to changing her life direction. Reflecting her strategic approach, these changes were to do with 'entitlement' in the workplace as a qualified social worker and the increased confidence that came with that.

Implications for support by university staff

The change points identified by participants other than Miranda, together with the factors which supported and developed learning during the course, highlight several ways that university teaching and support staff can contribute to perspective transformation. For teaching staff, this includes strategies for fostering transformative learning such as those suggested by Cranton (2006) for empowering learners and fostering self-reflection and self-knowledge. Participants' comments point to the importance of group work and practical learning through professional placements. A range of support strategies provided by teaching and support staff may impact positively on epistemic or psychological habits of mind. These include the suggestions in Table 2, which have been compiled from participants' responses.

Table 2: *How teaching and support staff can assist perspective transformation*

Strategies	Examples
Facilitate peer interaction	• Implement orientation and student group activities, including virtual activities for mature-aged students studying remotely or with limited face-to-face attendance opportunities. • Design learning opportunities to facilitate student interaction (e.g., small groups).
Facilitate practical learning	• Create environments to facilitate learning from real or simulated experiences. • Offer class activities (e.g., role plays) and practical placements in professionally-oriented courses.
Offer feedback and encouragement	• Provide prompt, regular and comprehensive feedback on assignments. • Offer personal support.
Offer flexibility	• Design and implement flexible admissions and selections processes. • Advise and support students to change study mode and study load when required. • Offer flexible assessment arrangements, sick leave, deferment and intermittence, family-friendly timetabling and recognition of prior learning.

Facilitate student-centred access to information and services	• Assist with providing pre-and post-entry course and careers information to all students, including examples of students from non-traditional pathways who succeeded in their studies. • Prepare and disseminate targeted information to families of first generation students, explaining what university study involves. • Bring academic and technological literacy services, financial advice and support and counselling direct to students, providing services based on students' perception of their needs. • Facilitate professional development so that teaching and professional staff can work together to provide a consistent student support approach.

Although university staff cannot influence all the factors that contribute to perspective transformation, they can assist students to overcome personal and structural barriers to success. The strategies for university staff suggested above are also likely to assist students like Miranda even if they do not result in perspective transformation.

Overall, the participants' experiences and the above implications reinforce the body of literature in adult education that discusses effective adult learning, while pointing to further potential for exploration in relation to the role of perspective transformation. In learning contexts, the findings are consistent with the emphasis on the importance of dialogue and the principles and practices that Vella (2002) suggests to begin, maintain and nurture dialogue. More broadly, the experiences of the older participants relate strongly to the key assumptions about adult learning developed by Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s, including the assumptions that an adult's self-concept develops from dependence to self-direction; that experience becomes an increasingly useful resource for learning; that adult students' readiness to learn is closely associated with moving from one developmental stage to the next; and that adult students have a life-centred orientation to learning which focuses on immediacy of application (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011). Knowles' model includes the role of motivation, with the assumption that the most potent motivators are internal pressures such as increased job satisfaction or self-esteem, compared to external motivators such as

better jobs, promotions or higher salaries. This parallels the concept of orientations to learning (Beaty, Gibbs & Morgan, 2005), which could be explored further in the context of perspective transformation.

The impact of study on these students, and Virginia's use of the word 'empowerment' to describe its effect on her, highlight the role of critical theory in informing the design of adult learning, both in its social emancipatory aspects, as well as the more personal elements reflected in Mezirow's theory. Recent developments in awareness of the social context of learning have further emphasised the importance of recognising the 'power dynamics' involved in learning, as Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007:430-431) note when they comment on the importance of knowing 'the backgrounds and experiences of our learners not only as individual learners, but also as members of social and culturally constructed groups such as women and men; poor, middle-class and rich, black, white and brown.' These researchers highlight the importance of this issue to teaching, learning, planning and administration, which has implications for all staff in the ways they interact with the adult students that they encounter.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the extent to which success in higher education was a transformative experience for a group of students from diverse backgrounds. Conclusions are based on students' stories during the final phase of a longitudinal research project, which followed their progress from enrolment to graduation. They are informed by aspects of Mezirow's theory (including contributions from others), and some related concepts from higher education.

Data from the first project stage (Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos & Crosling, 2010) identified perspective transformation in influencing participants' pathways to higher education. Analysis of participants' reflections at course completion indicated that success was a transformative experience for all but one participant, and that perspective transformation affected more participants during the course than before it. Comments from some participants indicated changes in epistemic habits of mind, but changes in the self-perceptions of the older students also suggest the impact of the study experience on psychological habits of mind. However, the experience of the

student who succeeded in the course but did not show evidence of perspective transformation indicates that success can occur without a transformative experience. Despite this, staff strategies that support perspective transformation may also assist these students and perhaps even impact on higher levels of achievement. Further investigation of factors affecting perspective transformation among other groups of students from diverse backgrounds could explore this issue further.

These findings may assist others involved with students from diverse backgrounds. They include implications for aspects of course design that encourage interaction and critical discourse among students. They also recognise the importance of a life-centred orientation in learning and the need for immediacy of application, assisting with the development of epistemic habits of mind. Staff can also consider strategies to support changes in psychological habits of mind, helping students to overcome personal and structural barriers to their participation in higher education.

Acknowledgements

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