Navigating personal change: Transforming perceptions of self as learner

by

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Abstract

The thesis is based on the findings of a qualitative case study that examined perceptions of self as learner for a small group of mature age participants who engaged in a thirteen week Enabling program in a regional Australian university. Transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2003) is drawn upon to frame the phases of personal transformation the participants experienced when they came into contact with various Discourses of a formal learning context. The emergence of particular borderland Discourses (Alsup, 2006; Gee, 2005) highlights some of the tensions associated with the personal transformations each participant experienced as their perceptions of self as learner were challenged, critiqued and transformed. Findings in this thesis reveal that although personal transformation can be empowering, it can be an erratic, emotion-laden process, fraught with contradiction and tension. Furthermore, contextual influences and the passage of time in which meaning making can occur have been found to be significant in the transformative learning process. These findings have implications for pedagogical practices of Enabling programs in Australia, especially in light of imminent Higher Education reforms (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) aimed at sizeable increases in participation rates and more equitable representation in university contexts. Amongst the citizenry projected to participate in such contexts will be mature age learners, some for whom inclusion in higher education may be problematised by past formal learning environments that have cemented negative perceptions of self as learner. Implications of this thesis suggest that future Enabling programs take into account the unique characteristics of the mature age learner in order to optimise their meaningful and successful higher education experiences. Ideally such programs would be theoretically and philosophically based on a comprehensive understanding of both the institutional and personal challenges faced by contemporary mature age learners who engage in Enabling programs. Theoretical findings in this thesis have the following implications for practice in Enabling programs: (a) the provision of supportive learning contexts that respect and build on the mature age learner’s prior skills and knowledge; (b) acknowledgement that emotion plays a vital role in the meaning-making process; and (c) the consideration of the sometimes contradictory patterns and different periods of time over which mature age learners come to examine and reconstruct long held perceptions of themselves as learners.
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Declaration

I declare that the main text of this thesis is entirely my own work and that such work has not been previously submitted as a requirement for the award of a degree at CQUniversity Australia or any other institution of higher education.

[Signature]

Julie Anna Willans

Date 3/12/10
Glossary of terms

The following terms are defined from within the limits and delimits of this thesis.

**Borderland Discourses:** Borderland Discourses represent the conceptualisation of Discourses as the language and “non-language stuff” (Gee, 2005, p. 5) in synthesis with borderland discourse (Alsop, 2006). This conception represents a means of accounting for the conceptual space that exists between the borders of the many Discourses of which individuals are part. This conceptual space is also known as the “liminal space” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 2) and has synergies with transformative learning theory in that it represents the space in which long held assumptions and perceptions are challenged or unsettled, leading the individual to make sense of new meaning about themselves and their world. Further elaboration of borderland Discourses is presented in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

**Constructivism:** Constructivism places an emphasis on the learning that is constructed in the mind of the learner, although external factors may contribute, and there is always a “sociocultural environment” at play (Taylor, 2006, p. 73). Constructivism purports that “meaning is seen to exist within ourselves, not in external forms”, and that our understanding of the world “is a result of our perceptions of our experiences” (Cranton, 2006, p. 23). Essential to a constructivist view is an emphasis that “all knowledge is context bound, and that individuals make personal meaning of their learning experiences” (Knowles, 1998, p. 142). Social networks of the individual inevitably impact on one’s construction of knowledge, for as Cranton (2006, p. 79) points out, “we see the world through a lens constructed in our interaction with our social context.”

**Discourse:** In this thesis, James Gee’s (2005) conceptualisation of Discourse (capital D) is drawn upon. He defines Discourse as “socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting and interacting in the ‘right’ places at the ‘right’ times with the ‘right’ objects” (p. 26). Such associations, notes Gee (p. 26), “can be used to identity oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network” (p. 26). Further elaboration of Discourse is presented in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

**Emotion:** Emotion refers to the affective dimension of what it is to be human. Barbelet (2002, p. 1) informs that when one cares about something, it “registers in their physical and dispositional being” as emotion. Emotion is also a physiological
process for emotional experiences lead the brain to alter our body chemistry and consequently help us to make sense of new experiences (Taylor, 2006). Moon (2004, p. 48) supports a constructivist model of learning and considers that “feelings influence what we actually know about something” and can both help and hinder the learning process. Further elaboration of emotion is presented in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

**Enabling program:** Enabling programs are often interchangeably referred to as preparatory, access, pathway or bridging programs that provide access into undergraduate programs at University. As the title suggests, they are designed to equip learners with the skills, knowledge and confidence to ensure adequate preparation for university studies. Enabling programs are a sometimes ‘free of tuition costs’ university initiative and conducted prior to the student’s commencement of an undergraduate program. The STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies) is an Enabling program referred to in this thesis.

**Hero’s Journey:** The Hero’s Journey is a metaphor used to seek greater self-knowledge. Based upon Vogler’s (1996) adaptation of Joseph Campbell’s (1993) research into the universality of mythic structures, the Hero’s Journey is comprised of a twelve stages journey, representative of events in our lives that bring change. The stages are: 1. The ordinary world; 2. The call to adventure; 3. Refusal of the call; 4. Meeting with the mentor; 5. Crossing the first threshold; 6. Tests, allies and enemies; 7. Approach to the innermost cave (the second threshold); 8. The supreme ordeal; 9. The reward (seizing the sword); 10. The road back; 11. Resurrection 12. Return with Elixir (freedom to live).

**Humanism:** The basic premise of humanism is to assist the mature age learner in realising “her or his potential to the fullest extent possible” (Brookfield, 2002, p. 1). In a humanistic approach, the educator typically advocates for and practises a collaborative and participatory approach, seeking to walk beside his or her students in a “co-learner role” (Cranton, 2006, p. 4). This ideally occurs in a nurturing and supportive environment in which the interests, concerns and needs of the learner are taken into consideration.

**Language and Learning course:** Language and Learning is one of four compulsory courses in STEPS. It is an academic writing course that builds on the past experience of its learners by acknowledging that prior learning experiences can strongly influence perceptions of self as learners. Writing strategies are employed
to open minds to greater knowledge through the exposure to a New Age discourse that encourages greater knowledge of self and others. This includes an understanding of preferred learning styles and personality types, and how such influence the individual's view of self, others and the world. *Language and Learning* encourages the students to apply knowledge of their learning skills in a variety of genres but specific focus is placed on the academic essay. Through research, writing and dialogue with others, the students are exposed to past and present social, political and economic influences in contemporary Australia.

*Mature age learners*: In this thesis, mature age learners are those students aged twenty-one years or more who take a program of study in a university context. An assumption has been made that the mature age learners’ formal school days occurred a number of years or decades ago.

*Metaphor*: The word *metaphor* is defined as “to carry” (*pherein*) and “beyond” (*meta*) (Vale & Eckartsberg, 1981, p. xxi). Metaphors provide “a way of seeing something in terms of something else” and refer to “that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another” (Soskice, 1985, p. 18). Metaphors are employed both consciously and unconsciously as a way to make sense of how we experience and interact with the physical and cultural environments of which we are part.

*Perception*: In this thesis, perception is taken to mean a belief or an image one has as a result of how one see or understands (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2000, p. 938).

*Perspective transformation*: Perspective transformation occurs when an event or events cause an individual to question a long held assumption. Through critical self-reflection and discourse with others, time and intuitive processes, an individual engages in meaning making about new knowledge that is at odds with their own long held assumptions. A perspective transformation occurs when the individual comes to conceptualise and act upon a new or revised perspective or worldview. A perspective transformation is an integral, potential outcome of transformative learning.

*STEPS*: Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies, a pre-university Enabling program offered on five of CQUUniversity Australia’s regional campuses. It is comprised of four compulsory courses and is offered internally in the full-time (13
weeks) or part-time (26 weeks) mode. It is also offered in the external mode (26 weeks). STEPS is philosophically underpinned by transformative learning theory and adult learning principles and is characterised by class sizes of 20 to 25 students, co-operative learning, group work and peer support. A foundational principle of STEPS is the use of the Hero’s Journey, framed as a metaphor to explain to its mature age learners that the STEPS journey may be typified by trepidation and uncertainty, but rewarded with elation and empowerment.

*Transformative learning theory:* Transformative learning theory is an organic adult learning theory that has built upon Jack Mezirow’s (1978) description of a ten phase process of personal perspective transformation, first coined in 1975. From these beginnings, transformative learning theory has evolved into a multidimensional and expansive theory of adult learning, comprised of cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual, psychological, extrarational and ecological dimensions. Transformative learning theory is described in depth in Chapter 3 of this thesis.