

CHAPTER 13**LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING - A CATALYST FOR
PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION**

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Abstract

Non-traditional avenues to higher education have been offered in Australia for over twenty years and attract students from a wide range of backgrounds. These avenues include preparatory programs. Based on the preliminary findings from research conducted with nine participants enrolled in a pre-university preparatory program, this paper illustrates how the uncovering of individual learning styles can act as a powerful catalyst in helping students change their perceptions of themselves as learners. Cranton's (2002) facets of transformation have been used as a framework to support the notion of perspective transformation having occurred. Initial data analysis findings suggest that in gaining a greater understanding of personal limitations to their learning, juxtaposed with the recognition and appreciation of individual learning strategies that do work, students can revise the perspective they have about what it means to be a 'good student' or a 'good learner'. With the revelation of this newfound knowledge, they become more confident as learners and cast off previous perspectives of self as a 'failed learner'.

INTRODUCTION

In teaching for transformation, educators can create an environment in which students learn to express, critically reflect on and perhaps revise some of the assumptions and perspectives they hold to be true about themselves as learners. This paper is based on preliminary research carried out with nine mature age students enrolled in the writing course of a pre-university preparatory program. It specifically discusses the context in which more and more people, who were previously marginalised by an 'academic discourse', are now choosing to undertake university education. In order to foster confidence and success, it is important that these non-traditional students be supported while engaged in a university preparatory program. Opening up

dialogue about students' learning styles as a means of facilitating their learning about learning is one example of such support. This learning about learning is a catalyst for dispelling the notions some students held about themselves as failed learners in past educational contexts, and provides them with the self-assurance to embark on new learning opportunities.

The paper investigates the ways in which the completion of a learning styles inventory by these students was a transformative experience for them and how the discovery and greater understanding of their individual learning style preferences were instrumental in transforming their perspectives of themselves as learners. The paper begins by describing the context in which the preparatory program is situated and provides an indication of the current change sweeping through higher education. Cranton's (2002) facets of transformation, which provide the conceptual and analytical framework for this paper, are then discussed. In terms of data generation, individual and group interviews were the chosen techniques and thematic data analysis was employed to isolate recurrent themes in the transcribed data. The major themes to emerge include 'disrupted realisations', 'the missing link: development of learning strategies' and 'confidence'.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Higher education in Australia is in a period of great change. With the wider implications of Brendan Nelson's (Federal Minister for Education and Training) Higher Education Reforms initiated in 2002, universities are facing greater scrutiny and challenge with regards to their delivery of knowledge. Massification of higher education has seen greater numbers of citizens from a wide range of backgrounds embarking on what was once considered to be the domain of the elite. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2004, p. 4 of 13), "changes in educational attainment among older people have been influenced by shifts towards life long learning and the need to develop and update knowledge and skills required for changes in the labour market". This is indicated by the increasing education participation rates of those aged 25 to 64 years. Between 1993 and 2003, the proportion of people in this age group attending an educational institution increased from 6% to 8% and this trend is set to continue for decades to come (ABS, 2004, p.5). In addition, the ABS (2004) reports that between 1993 and 2003, the proportion of people with a vocational or higher education qualification increased for all age groups.

In the context of the massification of higher education in Australia, greater access has been provided for previously marginalised citizens to embark on a higher education path through the provision of university preparatory

programs. This reflects the intention of the Department of Education, Science and Training, (2003, p. 11) that “individuals should be enabled to fulfil their potential, regardless of their personal circumstances and backgrounds”. Among these individuals are many mature age learners who wish to enter university but who may not have the skills, knowledge or confidence to do so. Furthermore, they bring with them assumptions about what it means to be a ‘good student’ or a ‘good learner’. The students who typically enrol in pre-university preparatory programs have tended to follow non-traditional pathways into university not only because of their prior educational experiences but also because of age, backgrounds and life priorities. One of the main aims of the pre-university preparatory program discussed in this paper is to enable learners to become independent, self-directed students and disrupt prior assumptions about themselves as learners (Learning Support Unit, 2005). Through the utilisation of various processes, the writing course entitled Language and Learning deliberately fosters critical self-reflection processes, challenging the student to expose past perceptions about themselves as learners, hold these perceptions up for reflection and critique, and activate a transformation in the perspective(s) they hold of themselves as learners.

PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

The phenomenon of perspective transformation is difficult to define, and this is reflected in Taylor’s (1997, p. 49) statement that “(o)ne of the most elusive concepts of transformative learning is the definitional outcome of a perspective transformation”. This intangibility means that perspective transformation cannot be neatly measured or assessed. Drawing from the work of Cranton, perspective transformation is defined as “an individual’s revision of a meaning perspective or a worldview as a result of critical self-reflection and discourse” (Personal communication, Patricia Cranton, 5 November, 2003). Essentially, perspective transformation is about individual change. Using a framework similar to that of Mezirow’s (2000) ten phases of transformation, Cranton (2002, p. 64) asserts that the process of transforming perspectives can be precipitated by an event – perhaps a seemingly mundane occurrence; an unsettling trauma; a random comment; or the actions of another. Individuals question and reflect upon the existing habits of mind and frames of reference they hold, subject them to some degree of critical scrutiny, and come to the realisation that the perspective they hold may be somewhat restricted. Upon reflection, they may perceive this and make changes or they may reaffirm the perspective they previously held. Perspective transformation can occur suddenly (epochal), or can unfold over time (cumulative) (Wiessner & Mezirow, 2000, p. 353). Although there is

some progression to it, its pattern is spiral rather than linear (Cranton, 2002, p. 65).

The perspectives and worldviews that individuals hold are created by an intricate series of conceptual lenses and filters that combine to be the spectacles through which they view the world. From the moment people are born into a culture, they perceive life largely through the lens of that culture. They don the characteristics of the society they are a part of, and the influence of caregivers and others throughout life add to the habits of minds that individuals develop as part of their primary discourse. As Cranton (2002, p. 65) notes, "The habits of mind that are established may have to do with our sense of self, interpretation of social systems and issues, morals and religious beliefs, and job-related knowledge". Habits of mind are the way one automatically views the world, unless challenged through critical reflection.

Cranton (2002, p. 65-66) believes the process of transformation to be composed of a series of random facets, and refers to these as "facets of transformation". She believes them to be "a rough guide" to help set up a learning environment that promotes transformation. She lists the following seven facets: an activating event that typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard or read; articulation of assumptions, that is, recognition of underlying assumptions that have been uncritically assimilated and are largely unconscious; critical self-reflection, that is, interrogation and examination of assumptions in terms of origin, the consequences of holding them, and why they are important; being open to alternative viewpoints; engagement in discourse, where evidence is weighed, arguments assessed, alternative perspectives explored, and knowledge constructed by consensus; revision of assumptions and perspectives to make them more open and better justified; acting upon revisions, behaving, talking, and thinking in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives.

Determining whether or not a perspective transformation has occurred remains an elusive pursuit, but this kind of change can be substantiated by evidence of some or all of the above facets having occurred and resulting in a changed action, conversation or attitude. The phenomenon of perspective transformation and its vehicle – transformative education, continue to be redefined as time unfolds. Perspective transformation is essentially about individual and personal transformation that occurs through the processes of critically reflecting on a perspective one holds, and changing or reconfirming that perspective.

Since Mezirow first coined the term over twenty years ago, the phenomenon of perspective transformation and the phases it entails have undergone much scrutiny and review. Considered by many to be the father of transformative learning, Mezirow's early studies were largely based on women participating in re-entry programs at community colleges and in consciousness raising groups (Mezirow, 1978). However, through research and critical discourse, many more voices have been added to colour the tapestry of transformative learning. More specifically, the phases of perspective transformation have come under critical review. Criticisms of perspective transformation by some (Merriam & Cafarella, 1999; Taylor, 1997) include the notion that it is too rational and objective in its approach, and that the phases of such are too rigid. In addition, Clark and Wilson (1991) allude to the exclusivity of Mezirow's earlier work and the social, political and historic limitations of the theory.

Nevertheless, as the phenomenon continues to evolve and undergo critique and change, it essentially involves the notion of personal change, with an event that acts as a catalyst for that change. One such catalyst can be the exercise of gaining a greater understanding of individual learning style preferences and how this knowledge can facilitate dialogic exchanges which challenge adult learners' prior perceptions about their abilities as learners. Furthermore, it can equip them with strategies and new knowledge to capitalise on learning strengths as well as adopt appropriate techniques to compensate for the perceived shortcomings of their previous learning styles.

FACILITATING PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION: A LEARNING STYLES EXAMPLE

The notion of preferred learning styles is a contested term as alluded to by Gordon and Bull (2004), and it is important to understand that learning styles are not static. Keefe (n.d. cited in Felder & Brent, 2005, p. 58) claims that learning styles are "characteristic, cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviours that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment". Learning styles or preferences are shaped by many factors including gender, age, personality and temperament and can change over time, as the outside world influences not only how teachers teach, but how students think they should learn. Such knowledge is important to learners as they come to realise that changes can be made. A greater understanding of one's learning style preferences can also provide valuable insight into the way one can learn most effectively. Felder (n.d.) states that:

Students preferentially take in and process information in different ways: by seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting, reasoning logically and intuitively, analysing and visualizing, steadily and in fits and starts... When mismatches exist between learning styles of most students in a class and the teaching style of the professor, the students may become bored and inattentive in class, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the courses, the curriculum, and themselves, and in some cases change to other curricula or drop out (http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/Learning_Styles.html).

Many strategies can be used to instil confidence in adult learners and encourage a greater understanding of their individual learning style preferences. One simple but effective tool used in the preparatory program upon which this research is based is Solomon and Felder's Index of Learning Styles (ILS), developed in 1991. Felder and Spurlin (2005, p. 1) describe this index as a multiple choice instrument with forty-four items that classify students as having preferences for one category or the other in each of the following four areas: active (learn by trying things out) or reflective (learn by thinking things through); sensing (concrete thinker, practical, oriented towards facts and procedures) or intuitive (abstract thinker, conceptual, oriented towards theories); visual (prefer material presented visually) or verbal (prefer material presented using written or spoken explanations); sequential (linear thinking process) or global (holistic thinking process). Research consistently indicates that when people are taught according to their individual learning style their academic achievement, attitude, self esteem, discipline and outlook towards the future improve (Sims & Sims, 1995, p. 4). It could then be argued that a greater understanding of individual learning style preferences could be viewed as a catalyst for perspective transformation.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The participants at the focus of this research formed a small subset of a larger group of adult students in Language and Learning, the writing course of a thirteen week pre-university preparatory program in autumn of 2004. An invitation was extended to all class members to participate in the research. Nine participants volunteered: three males and six females, ranging in age from 19 to 49 years. Specific data collection tools utilised in the research process consisted of face-to-face interviews, comprising semi-structured individual interviews and semi-structured group interviews with nine participants.

Individual interviews provided a more confidential environment for each participant's voice to be heard because they had the opportunity to discuss

their own perspectives, while group interviews provided opportunities for generating discussion and group dynamics. However, in week two of the thirteen week course, and prior to the interviews, as part of a Language and Learning lesson, the class completed Solomon and Felder's Index of Learning Styles. Upon completion of this index, they each identified the strategies they would be able to use to compensate for shortcomings in their learning and/or those they would utilise to capitalise on their learning strengths. Such interventions promoted dialogic encounters that were designed to enhance critical self-reflection on the part of the participants. They reflected on the experience of completing this activity in the subsequent interviews, thereby providing me with evidence to support the notion that perspective transformation may have occurred.

A combination of these semi-structured individual and group interviews was conducted five times during the course, with a two or three week interval between. Key questions asked were: What issues have challenged your thoughts so far in Language and Learning? Do you feel your views have changed in any way as a result of Language and Learning? How has Language and Learning helped you? Interviews were taped and then transcribed. To assist in the analysis process, an adaptation of the collective understandings of thematic analysis espoused by Aronson (1992), Leininger (1995) and Boyatzis (1998) was utilised. This entails finding patterns in the data "that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii). The use of thematic analysis enabled me to detect recurrent themes which emerged as the data underwent investigation. In providing evidence of changed perspectives, the verbal responses of the participants have been included. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality.

FINDINGS

In the iterative process of reading and rereading the data in the preliminary research, the following recurrent themes relating to the individual as a learner emerged: disrupted realisations; the missing link: development of learning strategies; confidence. Cranton's (2002, pp. 65-66) "facets of transformation" have been used as a conceptual framework in determining the possible instances of perspective transformation having occurred. Completion of the Solomon & Felder's Index of Learning Styles represented an activating event for the students because it exposed "a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard or read" (Cranton, 2002, pp. 65-66). This activity provided the catalyst for other facets of transformation to occur, evidenced by changed perspectives of the

participants and the consequent emergence of the first theme: 'disrupted realisations'.

DISRUPTED REALISATIONS

As an activating event, the Index of Learning Styles allowed for the identification of preferred individual learning styles and suitable learning strategies, and many participants spoke about changed perspectives of themselves as learners. Three participants, Bart, Barb and June reflected on past notions of 'self as a learner' and how, as a result of completing the inventory, the perspectives they previously held with regards to themselves as learners underwent change. Bart was one who alluded to a discrepancy between what he had always assumed to be true about himself as a learner and what he had now come to realise. He said: After completing the Learning Styles Inventory, I became so excited as I realised that I was not dumb after all. In gaining a greater understanding of his learning style preferences, Bart expressed a sense of exhilaration and liberation as he was released from past assumptions about his learning abilities. He also gave an indication as to how he viewed his previous cognitive abilities, expressed by his description of himself as "dumb". The process of completing the inventory and gaining new knowledge about his abilities as a learner was quite possibly the catalyst or activating event for Bart's changed perceptions.

Barb was another who revealed a similar discrepancy between what she had assumed to be true about herself as a learner and what she had come to realise about her abilities. She noted: Before doing the Index of Learning Styles I considered myself to be a failed learner. I now feel like I am part of something and I have learnt that I have a different learning style than other people! I realise that I am not stupid. Barb's use of the label "failed learner" clearly indicates the prior assumptions she held with regards to her learning abilities. She alluded to prior feelings of exclusion as a result of this perception and indicated that upon completing the inventory, she had gained new knowledge about her learning. This knowledge appeared to liberate her from past negative assumptions because she could recognise that she learnt differently to other people, and that that was quite acceptable. She was unshackled from her previous label of "stupid" and expressed a new sense of inclusion. Her perception of herself as a learner changed, accompanied by a new outlook that hinted of optimism.

June also indicated that as a result of completing the Index of Learning Styles, past perceptions of her abilities as a learner were disrupted. She said: I always felt I was hopeless learning some things, but after completing the Index of

Learning Styles, I have discovered I am not as dumb as I thought I was. June's use of the word "hopeless" speaks of a sense of despair and futility with regards to the perspective she once held about her learning abilities. However, a realisation that her learning abilities were not as fruitless as she thought, and that she was not "dumb", occurred as a result of an activating event, in this case, completing the inventory. In terms of Cranton's "facets of transformation" (2002, p. 65-66), June's progression was that she was then able to recognise the assumptions she held with regards to her learning abilities, question or hold them up for revision and change the perspective she held with regards to herself as a learner. She could then articulate and act in ways congruent with her transformed perspective. Barb and Bart indicated a similar progression.

THE MISSING LINK: DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING STRATEGIES

Another theme to emerge from the research findings was 'the missing link: development of learning strategies'. Some participants indicated that, as a result of completing the Index of Learning Styles, they were now able to gain a greater understanding of specific strategies needed to make their individual learning experiences more effective. Bart reflected:

I know verbal learning helps me best so I will talk ideas over with people more to find out different points of view. I now know I can remember concepts if they have some meaning to me. If I had understood that there were strategies I could have used in my school days, I am sure my learning experiences would have been more positive.

June was another participant who identified the strategies needed to capitalise on her learning strengths:

As a visual learner, I have come to understand that I learn best when I can picture something or imagine it. I now understand how I learn best, and I am much more confident and I am aware of strategies that suit my particular learning style.

As an activating event, the inventory allowed the participants to identify barriers to their prior learning, and upon reflection, use this new knowledge to facilitate optimisation of future learning situations. Statements such as "I now understand how I learn best" indicate progression through the "facets of transformation" in the sense that previous assumptions about past learning experiences were examined, exposed to reflection and an alternate perspective arrived at. In some ways, it appears as if a missing link has been found, resulting in a revision of assumptions and a new perspective or

understanding with regards to how learning could be optimised. Furthermore, new knowledge of individual learning style preferences provided a means for the participants to reflect on past assumptions as to why their learning experiences in the past were not positive. This perhaps provided some explanation for mismatches that may have occurred between prior teaching and learning experiences,

CONFIDENCE

A third theme to emerge from the findings was that of 'confidence'. The research in this study indicates that the discovery of learning styles was an uplifting experience for some, as they came to have a greater understanding of past negative learning experiences. This possibility instilled a renewed sense of confidence for Barb, who observed:

The work I completed in the first few weeks on learning styles has been like discovering a key to not only my character and learning styles but to my brain and I know this will be invaluable in the next few years of study. I have experienced a real change and I now feel I have the confidence to go on.

June also reflects this newfound confidence who said: I didn't think I had it in me to succeed here at uni. Now I feel I can. Discovering my learning styles has opened a whole new chapter in my life and in my potential to learn.

The participants clearly conveyed a sense of liberation as past assumption of self as learners become transformed. A new assumption relating to self-assurance about what they could potentially achieve became obvious. In likening the acquisition of new knowledge about learning styles to that of "discovering a key", Barb clearly indicated a new awakening or perspective, one that could impact on her future learning engagements. June also hinted at the possibility of enhanced learning opportunities for the future when she commented that learning style had "opened up a whole new chapter in my life". In terms of the "facets of transformation", both Barb and June indicated a progression from examining what they had always assumed to be true about themselves as learners, to new assumptions and perspectives. Such a revelation speaks of a more optimistic way of looking at learning, for the participants were able to make links between their enhanced knowledge and understanding of individual learning style preferences, and the more positive outcomes possible in future learning engagements.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented preliminary findings to support the notion that greater understanding and awareness of one's preferred learning styles have

the potential to act as a catalyst for perspective transformation. Research conducted with a small group of mature age learners in a pre-university preparatory program support this contention. Cranton's (2002, p. 65-66) "facets of transformation" have been used as a framework to interrogate the data that support the notion that perspective transformation could be said to have occurred. The deliberate utilisation of a simple and by no means definitive tool functioned as an activating event and learners variously moved through the facets of transformation. As a result, they came to change perspectives they held with regards to themselves as learners. In summary, data analysed for this paper revealed three major themes: 'disrupted realisations'; 'the missing link: development of learning strategies'; and 'confidence'. 'Learning about learning' can be a catalyst for change, as learners can revise perspectives they hold of themselves, identify appropriate learning styles to facilitate their learning, and potentially engage in more positive learning experiences.

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