The Essence of Transformative Learning and HE Undergraduate Students

Mayer Marian, **Eccles** Sue, **Devis Rozental** Camila, **Jones** Janie,
Bournemouth University, UK

Outline

Understanding transformative learning amongst HE students is often based on robust but limited research methods. We contend that to truly understand that 'light bulb' moment when students' transformative insights into critical reflection on learning occur (Mezirow 1990), we should use alternative methods to allow their experiences to be captured and their voices to be heard. The study proposed here uses longitudinal inquiry to explore the experiences of undergraduate students in a UK university.

Mezirow (1990 cited by O'Neil and Marsick 2007, p.185) defines Transformative Learning (TL) as:

> The process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the re-formulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative understanding of one's experience. Learning includes acting on these insights.

TL requires the learner to undergo a process of critical reflection, allowing a learning experience, which is then acted upon or used to create a new perspective and requires or relies on personal experience, empathy and the desire to change.

Taylor and Cranton (2013) question whether TL theory is sufficiently well-developed and integrated with previous approaches to offer a useful framework to examine and understand the learning process. Concerns include the methodology typically employed when undertaking studies applying the TL framework, which has often been more positivistic or based on 'snapshot' data collection and limited theoretical underpinning (Stuckey et al. 2014; Newman 2008 and Newman 2012).

The study aims to address these concerns and contribute to ongoing research by undertaking longitudinal cooperative inquiry (Heron 1996) to attempt to capture the real 'essence' of learning development: to understand the motivators for students engaging in learning development; to discover the 'light bulb' events that transform their learning experience; to better understand the role of their tutors in their development of skills, attributes and knowledge and to explore the actual or perceived barriers to retention, progression and academic success (Heron 1996).

Learning development support typically offered in UK universities is via online resources, which does not necessarily match the learning styles of all students (Diaz and Diniz 2012). Research has demonstrated the tangible benefits of congruent, subject-specific learning development in the form of one-to-one tutoring and small group seminars for WP, non-traditional and international students (Biggs 2003; Branick et al. 2005; Coates 2007; Zepke and Leach 2005). Such benefits enhance retention, progression and success which, together with student satisfaction and independent learning, are known to be enhanced when students feel supported by their institution, identify closely with their own School/Faculty and receive academic support closely aligned to quality teaching (Coates 2007; Durkin and Main 2002; Lizzio et al. 2002).

Redding (2011) argues that learning development teaching should be contextualised within the subject discipline in order to achieve student-centred congruent learning (Prosser and Trigwell 1999), whilst Jones (2008) notes that supporting students through integrated skills development, proactive personal tutoring; the sharing of good practice (within institutions and beyond) and developing cross-institutional strategies can all aid student retention.

Notwithstanding these known outcomes and benefits, we still have limited understanding of why or how they are achieved through supported learning development activities. This proposed study therefore aims to provide an in-depth, longitudinal understanding of how structured learning development support can assist HE students in achieving those 'light bulb' moments in their learning – what happens and when, in terms of transformational learning, that enables them to understand their own learning styles and ability, to better engage with and enjoy their studies and increase confidence and self-awareness.

The study is informed by existing learning development support available to undergraduate media and humanities students at a UK university. Here, experienced academic staff, who are familiar with a broad range of media and humanities programmes offer individual and small group support to facilitate development and enhance their academic and study skills. This enables them to prepare assignments, sit exams and engage fully in group work with greater confidence and ability which, in turn, has a positive impact on retention and academic success.

As active participants in the project (Heron 1996; Bradbury and Reason 2003), students will form part of the inquiry group to inform and finesse the implementation and dissemination of the intended outputs. This approach typically involves between six and ten action/shared reflection phases (Heron 1996) allowing all members to engage fully in the inquiry process. As the approach requires the creation of an inquiry group at the initial stage of the 'inquiry process', specific research methods will develop organically through a steering group comprising the researcher and approximately eight UG students (Heron 1996). This group, facilitated by the

researcher, will inform the nature and progression of the inquiry at all stages, establishing the purpose, aims and intended outcomes of the research.

The results of this study will contribute to knowledge about the nature of TL by providing longitudinal data generated from the reflections, discussions and evaluations of students. In addition, understanding how and when TL occurs in students will assist in providing appropriate – often bespoke – support that will help address issues of retention, progression and academic success: particularly important in relation to those WP and other students with lower achievements and fewer educational opportunities than their student peers (Davis 2011).

Through the provision of congruent one-to-one support, students can develop essential academic skills including: critical, reflective analysis and thinking; research skills; self-efficacy, confidence and autonomy, thereby enhancing academic rigour (Bandura 1995; Baird 2012; Biggs and Tang 2007; Cottrell 2001; Crosling and Webb 2002; Walker 2006). This project aims to promote learning development as a specific addition to existing and typical HE provision (lectures, seminars and tutorials) to increase student potential and positively impact on engagement, progression and academic success. Our ultimate aim is to demonstrate that student-centred, congruent learning development provision can support learning transformation which potentially benefits and enhances the experiences of all students (Bamford 2008; Crosling et al. 2008).

[964 words]

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