

Not just bridging the 'skills gap': Creating effective holding environments for meaningful transformations in contexts associated with widening participation in higher education.(0140)

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Further education colleges in the United Kingdom have a long and successful history of involvement in further, higher, adult, academic and vocational education, and may well be able to claim to be capable of 'making a difference' to the learner, bringing about transformation to the way in which students relate to their studies, and to themselves as purposeful individuals and citizens. Currently, higher education in further education colleges (HE in FE) is a major site for meeting the government agenda regarding widening participation in higher education (Blackie et al 2009), and also for 'bridging the gap' in relation to the economic need for a workforce with higher level skills. However, exploring HE in FE, and the practice of HE in FE educators, from a transformatory perspective may be useful to a wider higher education community, one which aims to promote an authentic higher education (Barnett 2007), supporting the development of individuals who are capable of 'making up their own minds', both for themselves and for a wider society. Kegan (2000), suggests that educators who ask students to be able to develop this capacity are not simply asking them to take on new skills, or develop more self-confidence, but are asking for a transformation in their core sense of self, and how it relates to the world. In particular, a revision is required to the way in which they conceive that knowledge is constructed, which relates in turn to their stage of development.

Transformative learning is defined as a process by which the assumptions, beliefs, values and perspectives held by an individual are made open to questioning, and through this questioning become better justified or open to change. (Mezirow 2000; Cranton 2006a). Mezirow's original research related the theory to adult learning, but theories of adult learning including those developed by Knowles (1984), Candy (1991) and Grow (1991), may be useful for considering approaches to learning in higher education, especially where there is emphasis on independent and lifelong learning. Ideas relating to adult education tend to take an holistic view of student learning, regarding the student as a 'whole person', putting learning into the contexts of lives, previous experiences and desires as well as taking into account feelings and relationships. Transformative learning provides a way of conceptualizing and constructing a higher education with liberal intentions, one which aims to do more than bridge the skills gap, which encourages the capacity to manage external realities based on awareness of internally generated beliefs, identities and social relations (Hodge et al 2009).

The ability to 'make up their own mind', is described by Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (1999) as self-authorship, and relates closely to ideas associated with independent, autonomous or self directed learning. These features are commonly promoted in higher education curricula, but Kegan (1994) considers that these demands may be quite a challenge to many young people because it is asking them to change not just the way in which they construct knowledge, but also the way in which they believe knowledge is constructed. Many young people enter higher education expecting knowledge to be provided to them and find, for example, difficulty in navigating a terrain which asks them to learn for themselves and with others, to select and validate resources or make up their own minds but remain objective. Kegan (1982), suggests that individuals have an evolving relationship between how they understand themselves, their world and the relationship between the two, involving periods of change and stability. Significant to discussions regarding the expectations of higher education are the nature of the stages through which the self evolves, and the types of psychosocial environments, or 'holding environments' (Kegan 1982:116), which provide a balance between the challenge and support necessary for encouraging evolution through these stages and also interventions which might promote movement towards self authorship (Pizzolato 2005). Barnett (2007:17) considers that an authentic higher education promotes a student's 'will to learn', which involves commitment to a sustained period of learning, but one which also involves taking risks and experiencing discomfort . In order that learning continues to thrive through discomfort, it is necessary that the educator construct an environment starting from the student's current way of knowing, values it, and then builds a bridge towards the new way of knowing. This also involves loss, and may well be a traumatic experience, as maintaining a particular understanding is safe (Cranton 2006a), and will best be facilitated by an educator who understands the significance of their own influence.

When Kegan (1982:114), uses the term 'holding environment', he borrows from Winnicott's definition, referring to the world in which the individual is embedded at a particular point in their development, and one which is in motion through time, space, relationships, needs and desires. Using this term in relation to a 'pedagogical sanctuary' (Barnett 2007:76), where the student feels both challenged and nurtured, helps identify that the environment that the educator creates needs to authentically, intentionally and progressively support the student through 'fine grains of practice (Elmore 2000), towards the ability for self-directed learning and ultimately the self authorship necessary for making a meaningful contribution to society (Cranton 2006b).

This conceptual framework forms the basis for a study relating to HE in FE, and how educators in this context raise the potential for transformation towards self –authorship by constructing

environments and learning opportunities which intentionally provoke students to consider how they view the construction of knowledge (Baxter Magolda 2009). It involves a collaboration between a university researcher and HE in FE educators. Brock (2010) has explored the ten precursor steps that Mezirow (2000), puts forward to promote transformational learning, and suggests that in addition to a disorientating dilemma, the encouragement of reflection, the trying out of new roles and collaboration are the most significant steps in the process. As part of the exploration of effective holding environments, it considers as authentic practice (Kreber 2007), the role and intentions of educators who teach with developmental intention to provide students with the necessary skills for meaningful involvement in the 21st century. References

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