

Transformative Learning: An Autoethnographic Account of an SpLD Specialist's Transformative Learning Journey

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Abstract

This is an autoethnographic account of my own transformative learning as an SpLD specialist doing an MSc and a PhD. Here I investigate what transformative learning means and how postgraduate study transformed me as a person as well as transforming my practice. I advocate that SpLD specialists who work with adult learners need to reflect on our learning and to engage in transformative learning opportunities. Transformative learning is a holistic approach that can help us to develop connections with our learners while also developing our practice.

Key words: Autoethnography, Transformative Learning, SpLD Specialists; Adult Learners

Introduction

What happens when you engage in a process of learning that transforms you – transformative learning? In this article I look at the concept of transformative learning more deeply, starting with my own autoethnographic account of learning as an SpLD specialist. I want to share my journey of transformative learning with you and also to reflect on the transformative learnings that adult learners such as those in Higher Education experience when they work with an SpLD specialist. I wanted to tell my story as sometimes I think we can forget what it is like to learn and we can forget what it is like to change in the course of our learning. My story draws on the work of key theorists in the area of transformative learning. My experiences of transformative learning have changed me as a person but also my practice.

Research methodology

This is an autoethnographic piece of research. It may be a little different to what we typically consider as research. I had my own internalised ideas of what constitutes 'real research' which was initially more positivist – the typical assumption that research is carried out by people in white lab coats carrying clip boards (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). I felt unsure about having the 'right' to position myself within the research. I have now learnt that establishing yourself into the body of the research itself is considered a valid approach in autoethnography and particularly in feminist methodologies (White and Dotson, 2010). *The Handbook of Ethnography* was very helpful in supporting my understanding of autoethnography, particularly in terms of how 'we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions' (Adams et al., 2016, p. 10). This resonates with what I had read of how crucial it is for the researcher to keep challenging her ideas of what we believe is happening in the research. I am very drawn to the view of autoethnography being that of detailing 'repeated feelings, *stories* and happenings' (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 277). This research will be my detailed story of transformative learning.

Autoethnographic approaches are a good fit for a discussion of transformative learning. In fact, researchers have written of the transformative experiences that an autoethnographic research approach affords. Raab (2015, p. 14) writes of how 'autoethnography encompasses the idea of fostering self-awareness and self-discovery, which may lead to transformation. The autoethnographical researcher must be comfortable exposing his or her deepest emotions'. For Custer (2014, p. 11) 'autoethnography is a transformative research method because it changes time, requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honors subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits'. I particularly liked that Custer included vulnerability in his definition of autoethnography as researchers may feel pressure to hide vulnerability to appear 'professional'. However, I would like to write of my own vulnerabilities and difficulties as I

hope it will be helpful for others and to encourage us to engage in other concepts of what constitutes research.

Research story

My transformative learning as an SpLD Specialist actually started on a journey. This was a bus journey on the rather unglamorous Bluestar Number 3 on the way home from the University of Southampton. This is where I first opened *Reading in the Brain* (Dehaene, 2009). Reading this book on a bumpy bus journey was the start of a transformation that led to an MSc, working as a Specialist Teacher/Assessor, a PhD and now a lecturing role and it all started with a bus journey.

In 2013 I was accepted onto an MSc in Education in SpLDs. I had worked with so many learners with dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, autism, Tourettes and TBIs and I felt that they had been let down by systems that viewed them as 'lacking'. I wanted to learn more to work with these learners so that they got the education they deserved. It was somewhat of a shock that first day to get back into education, to be the student rather than the teacher but it was a good feeling, especially when I went into the university and scored some books from the reading list. It was Dehaene's text, in particular, that piqued my interest. I started to read the book on the bus, and I was intrigued by the idea of parts of the visual word form area as the 'letter box' of the brain (Dehaene, 2009). This concept was like a light bulb moment for me. I could almost feel my brain, unused to getting back to study, grinding its gears, going 'yes, this is a big deal'. I was so intrigued by what I had read that I missed my stop!

This feeling of 'a big deal' grew stronger when I started a module on social justice and inclusion. We had a guest lecturer – Dr Cristina Azaola – who gave us a talk about Amartya Sen's Capability Approach theory (Sen, 1993). The Capability Approach places emphasis on lives people are living and their *individual* capabilities not their resources or outcomes. You look at the individual to see what they can achieve that is of value to them (Walker and Unterhalter, 2010).

It was this sense of the social justice that the Capability Approach offers to people, particularly those who are marginalised that resonated with me. It was this sense of 'lack' that I felt was unfairly applied to the talented learners I had worked with in other settings. Why were Sen's ideas of capabilities and functionings not applied to neurodivergent learners (Sen, 1985)? This is what Jack Mezirow, often considered the father figure of transformative learning, calls 'a disorientating dilemma' (Papastamatis and Panitsides 2014, p.75). It is this sense of a dilemma that is considered the first stage on the path of transformative learning.

Transformative Learning

Let's take a deeper look at what is transformative learning. According to Mezirow (2003, pp.58–59), it is 'learning that transforms [...] sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change'. It encourages us to question our thoughts and assumptions. I sometimes worry that we do not question enough the thoughts and biases that we may have unconsciously acquired throughout our lives, particularly when we have been working in our areas of expertise such as SpLD assessment and teaching.

What I find interesting about Mezirow is that he set out ten specific phases for the process of transformative learning by which an adult learner's 'meaning perspective ... thought, feeling and will' change (1978, p.105). This meaning perspective enables the learner to 'reinterpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations, thus giving a new meaning and perspective to an old experience' (Mezirow 1991, p.5). The figure below shows Merzirow's Ten Phases of Transformative Learning.

Figure 1 Mezirow's Ten Phases of Transformative Learning

(Kolagani, 2019)

The famous psychologist Erik Erikson explored the concepts of *habits of mind* which are considered our 'broad, habitual ways of thinking' (Erickson 2007, p.66). In transformative learning, we look at habits of mind and expand them to include *meaning perspectives* which is 'the structure of cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated to – and transformed by – one's past experiences' (Mezirow 1978, p.101). This is 'how we are caught in our own history and are reliving it' (Mezirow 1978, p.101). For Mezirow (1978), it is crucial to examine these frames of reference otherwise we live out our lives without challenging assumptions. When we examine our habitual ways of thinking and our cultural assumptions, this can then lead to a *perspective transformation* (Mezirow 1978).

Kitchener (2008) gives an example of perspective transformation such as when an educator examined how she learnt keyboard shortcuts in Word and realised that she could apply these shortcuts to other Microsoft applications. However, perspective transformation can also occur in difficult circumstances that can necessitate a critical re-evaluation. This could be where an SpLD tutor critically examines her approaches to using Assistive Technology and realises that she may not be using it effectively.

Applying Mezirow's Ten Phases to my own experience

I experienced perspective transformation by examining my own habits of mind and my cultural assumptions throughout my learning on my MSc and PhD programmes. The following is how Mezirow's 10 Phases mapped onto my own experiences:

1. A disorienting dilemma.

My 'disorientating dilemma' was reconciling ideas of social justice and inclusion to the trainings of SpLD tutors particularly for those of us who work with adults. I felt this really keenly as an SpLD assessor/tutor-in-training on my MSc course.

2. Self-examination

I examined my own learning on social justice and inclusion; I believed that I did not have enough understanding of theories of social justice and inclusion, particularly in the SplD context.

3. Critical assessment

I began to research the areas that I felt were most pertinent to me to learn about. I looked at the concepts of inclusion and was particularly interested in ideas like Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is an inclusive approach to learning that looks at multiple ways to engage learners such as using multiple means of representation and multiple means of action and expression (Centre for Applied Learning and Technology, 2011). I began to look at more ideas on social justice and read the work of Bourdieu with emphasis on the concepts of capital: social, cultural and economic (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Economic capital refers to financial means while social and cultural capital refers to the knowledge you gain from taking part in certain cultural events and the society you live in.

Commented [JK1]: Would you add something to explain UDL?

Commented [JK2]: And add another brief explanation of Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural capital

4. Recognition

I started working as a specialist assessor/tutor in 2015. I was working between two universities – one a Russell Group institution and the other a post-'92 institution. In my practice, I could see the very real differences in experiences between the student cohorts, the different types of capital required in the two universities and the concept of educational reproduction where the education system reproduces the dominant culture of a particular society (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). This was particularly apparent when working with first-generation learners, many of whom were people of colour. Yet there seemed to be no recognition of these concepts in our work. This seemed a glaring omission.

Commented [JK3]: Would you give a brief explanation of 'educational reproduction'.

5. Exploration

I started exploring ideas of social justice and inclusion with my learners. When learners shared their experiences of the classroom, their expectations of themselves,

the different familial and socio-cultural expectations, I found it brought a richness to my sessions. Students were able to reflect more on why they were expected to learn in certain ways, why they held certain expectations of themselves and indeed, why they thought they were lacking in capabilities.

6. **Planning a course of action**

I decided that I needed to take my interests further and that I needed to learn more. I needed to do a PhD. As ever, it was my students who were my best teachers. In talking with them, watching them grow in confidence in their capabilities, I felt I needed to support other SpLD specialists to embed concepts of social justice and inclusion into their practice. I talked to Cristina, the lecturer who set me on the 'disorientating dilemma'. I asked if she would be willing to take me on as a PhD student. I applied for a PhD and a PhD scholarship and was successful. I was off on another journey.

7. **Acquisition of knowledge or skills to carry out new plan**

When I started my PhD, I felt that I particularly needed to develop my research skills. I had done some research before for my MSc but I felt I needed to bolster my understandings. I took part in different courses on statistical analysis, qualitative research analysis, methodology trainings and data management. These were all key skills in becoming a researcher, to carry out my plan.

Commented [JK4]: This first sentence needs some clarification

8. **Provisional trying of new roles**

Learning to view myself as a researcher was tricky for me. I felt unsure about this new identity of a researcher, I was much more confident to position myself as an SpLD specialist. However, as my examiner in my PhD Upgrade meeting told me, you need to grow into your role. I purposely began to introduce myself in university meetings as 'researcher' as well as 'SpLD specialist'. It was like trying on a new pair

Commented [JK5]: I have added 'of. This title is from the 10 phase chart'

of shoes, my researcher shoes even!

9. Building of competence and self-confidence

Building on the idea of my emerging identity of a researcher, I felt emboldened to try different research approaches in my PhD such as that of using Collaborative Inquiry approaches. I also became involved in a research project from consultancy work with Health Education England. I was able to advise colleagues on research design, ethics and methodologies. I proved to myself that I had strengths in these areas which helped my somewhat shaky confidence to grow.

10. Reintegration

I was awarded a PhD in June 2022. There were times when I really thought that I would not finish, that I lacked the ability to finish. But I kept on. I kept reflecting, I kept thinking and I kept talking. While ostensibly the subject of my PhD was on using social justice and inclusion theories with SpLD tutors, I also wanted to see if learning about these theories was transformative for these research participants. We found that these theories were indeed transformative for the SpLD tutors. What was also interesting was how much I was transformed by the process. I am a different person to the woman who opened a book on reading on the No.3 bus in 2013. I am more reflective, more open to questioning my assumptions, more aware. This has helped my practice and makes me a better educator.

I am a better educator because I realise, just like I was transformed through learning, my students are undergoing transformation in their learning regardless of their disciplines. This helps me to engage with learners in a more authentic way. I have learned not to 'judge' and instead to ask better questions in order to understand what learners are experiencing.

Commented [JK6]: This overview of your development placed within the theoretical context of your PhD is helpful. It would be great to show how this can be applied to day to day work with learners with SpLD in a way that our readers can relate to. You could perhaps develop your final paragraph, perhaps with some references as to what might be relevant from your application of social justice, etc to your practice in the SpLD world. It doesn't need to be necessarily 'academic' but just something that really speaks to our practical readership.

Why transformative learning matters: reflection

Transformative learning matters. Perspective transformation in particular for Mezirow (1978) can lead to social action such the Black awareness movement and the anti-war movement in the US. Critical reflection and critical self-reflection are the primary means for Mezirow of enacting transformative change along with the ten phases of transformative learning. Mezirow (1995, p.46) wrote that **reflection** is 'the process of turning our attention to the justification for what we know, feel, believe and act upon'. He places such value on reflection that in 1991 he added an additional phase to the original 10-phase model of transformative learning. This phase reflects the importance of critical self-reflection and is 'renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships'. I want us all to reflect on our work but in particular to recognise how when we learn we change not just intellectually but also in a holistic way.

Transformative learning as soul work: connection

There is a growing movement towards a more holistic concept of transformative learning (Papastamatis and Panitsides 2014, p.78). Several authors have written of how transformative learning helps to develop deeper metacognition (Rusch and Brunner 2013) and helps to develop several ways of knowing (Tanaka *et al.* 2012). Dirkx (2014) emphasises the influence of imagination and emotion in transformative learning. Furthermore, Dirkx (cited by Leonard and Willis, 2008) views transformative learning as a deep process known as soul work. For Dirkx (1997, p.82), soul work 'beckons to a relationship between the individual and his or her broader world'. This broader world, for scholars like O'Connor (2002, p. 242) includes the environment, and so transformative learning is 'somatic and emotional ways of knowing and our place in the natural world and the connections we have to one another as human beings'. For Blalock and Akehi (2018, p.101) 'dialogue can be a powerful mechanism for transformative learning. Having a

conversation with another person can allow beliefs and assumptions [...] to be made available for examination and critique by the sharer and listener alike'. Again, this sense of connection is crucial for the SpLD specialist, we know that our work depends on the connections we develop with our learners whether that in is one-to-one support or assessments.

Engage in learning that transforms you

Ultimately, I believe that we should all be given the opportunity for transformative learning. When we engage in a CPD session or take part in other qualifications, we need to engage in these elements of questioning our assumptions, our habits of minds, in order to bring about perspective transformation. It is not easy at times, it is not straight forward but I believe that such transformative learning supports us in our personal and professional development. When we are not afraid to delve deeper into the process of our learning, we can share such knowledge with our learners. It changes your practice as you automatically embed concepts of reflection into your practice, you support learners to question themselves and to engage in dialogue that supports connection and development. This can all happen in very humble ways, such as opening a book on a bus journey home.

If you have any questions about transformative learning or anything else that has been discussed in this article, please do get in touch.

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