Non-Traditional Students Studying Higher Education in a Further Education Setting: A Case Study Exploring Student Experiences

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Abstract

The global trend towards widening participation in higher education (HE) has reshaped the structure, character and ethos of the sector. Consequently, widening participation (the shift from elite to mass HE) has resulted in a proliferation of research examining how HE providers have responded to the challenges of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Much of this research considers the multiple cognitive, emotional and social adjustments, and transitional changes associated with non-traditional students (Leatherwood, 2005; Reay and Crozier, 2010; Burton and Golding Lloyd et al, 2011). This article stems from interviews with twelve non-traditional graduates from a full-time BA programme undertaken at a Scottish Further Education College (hereafter HE in FE). It explores a) did graduates experience significant social, emotional, and intellectual growth as a result of participation and b) if so, can growth be conceptualised as transformative? (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1990). The research findings indicate that, to varying degrees, all participants experienced significant shifts in how they experience, conceptualise and participate in their social worlds. The conclusions are that students can experience participation in HE in FE as transformative. The findings of this small-scale study will provide some useful insights for practitioners and educational developers wishing to adopt more inclusive practices and policies.

Key Terms: Widening participation; non-traditional students; life experiences; lifelong learning; competing commitments; transformative experiences.

Introduction

There has been a sustained policy commitment to widen participation in all types of post-compulsory education for most of the twentieth century (Collini, 2012), but particularly since the publication of the Robbins Report (1963). Widening participation has been defined as a way of stretching a system to accommodate a 'much wider mix' of students (Thompson, 2000, p. 2). This includes students with negative experiences of compulsory education. For some of them, life experiences

can not only act as a barrier to participation in education, but also means that learning activities are not naturally included in their lives (Mezirow, 1978b). Often referred to as non-traditional students; these students will likely also have low self-efficacy and low levels of confidence which, when considered in juxtaposition with often poor experiences of compulsory education, can be a barrier to motivation and achievement (Pintrich, 2003; Peetsma and Hascher et al, 2005; Thoonen and Sleegers et al, 2010). Applying Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus; mature non-traditional students, who are predominantly working class, may feel they lack social, cultural and intellectual capital; traditionally considered requisite to meaningful participation in higher education (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Consequently, it has been concluded that non-traditional students are both, generally under-prepared for the rigours of HE (Haggis, 2006; Burton and Golding Lloyd et al, 2011; Burke, 2012), and that their inclusion in HE has brought about a 'collapse in standards' (Fox, 2000, p. 245; *cf.* Haggis, 2006; Coffield, 2008; Arum and Roksa, 2011).

Nonetheless, the purpose of this article is to respond to what we consider a much too fatalistic view of both, current HE in FE provision and, of many non-traditional students who return to HE in FE. Consequently, we present part of the findings of a study undertaken with graduates of a full-time academic Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme, facilitated in a Scottish Further Education College. We agree that, for myriad reasons, many students studying HE in FE do not fully engage with learning(McArthur, 2011, p. 742; *cf.* Miller, 2010); that an inevitable consequence is that many 'are not learning much' (Arum and Roksa, 2011, p. 98). Nonetheless, we propose that first, studying HE in FE can be the genesis of a process of significant transformative social, emotional, and intellectual growth in many non-traditional students and second, negative experiences of compulsory schooling, followed by negative habitus experiences in adult life, need not be a barrier to a transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 2000; Cranton, 2006).

Widening Participation

The Robbins Report (1963) concluded by recommending significant investment in the mass expansion of post-compulsory education. Over thirty years later, The Dearing Committee (1997) found that the lowest social classes continued to be 'under-represented' (Stevenson and Clegg et al, 2010, p. 106). The Kennedy Report (1997) also emphasised an inability to recruit educationally disadvantaged adults. A perceived decline in academic standards has however been attributed to successive governments' desire to widen participation to non-traditional students, who according to Burke (2012), are often deemed 'unsuitable' for HE study (p. 129; *cf.* Haggis, 2006). Nonetheless, in an increasingly unstable, and 'highly competitive' global economy, individuals are now increasingly compelled to take responsibility for their own employability (Burke, 2012, p. 30). Drawing on the work of C Wright Mills (1959), the public issue of limited employment opportunities

becomes a private trouble of continuous retraining for whatever employment opportunities do exist.

Correspondingly, it has been argued that colleges are often now seen as businesses (Coffield, 2008, 2010). Faced with competition from other institutions, colleges are increasingly under pressure to be flexible with entry qualifications and experience (Walker, 2010; MacArthur, 2011). A consequence is that, in a drive to keep student numbers high, students are now not so much 'selected' to participate on the basis of their 'potential', but 'seduced' (Walker, 2010, p. 201) or 'coerced' to participate (Gallacher and Crossan et al, 2002, p. 494). Often cynically posited as a 'bums on seats' approach (Leese, 2010, p. 241; *cf.* Thomas, 2000; Naidoo, 2003); what may be often neglected is consideration of students' 'ability to participate' (Archer and Hutchings, 2000, p. 569).

Using the language of 'dumbing down' (Haggis, 2006; Miller, 2010), HE in FE has been charged with accusations that 'too few students have challenging academic experiences' (Arum and Roksa, 2011, p. 93). It has also been concluded that their values are 'often at odds with academic commitment' (ibid., 2011, p. 3; Leatherwood, 2005; Haggis, 2006; Burton and Golding Lloyd et al, 2011). Reading, writing and other tasks associated with learning, is anathema to many students (Robbins, 1993, p. 159). Nonetheless, we offer a caveat; what is ignored is the significant number of HE in FE students, who are both able and deeply interested in learning. Many of these students, similar to the participants featured in this research, also have significant caring responsibilities. 'Juggling' the 'competing commitments' of a caring role with studying has been shown to have a negative impact on the learning experience (Cappleman-Morgan, 2005, npn; Kevern and Webb, 2005).

Cappleman-Morgan (2005) further concluded that women returners can be reproached by other family members for neglecting the family, leading to persistent feelings of 'tension, conflict and guilt' (Kevern and Webb, 2004, p. 330). Nonetheless, a number of research studies on non-traditional students, caring and studying simultaneously, conclude that HE in FE offers a way to improve students' self-confidence and self-esteem; that following meaningful participation, students' lives can be changed forever (Wainwright and Marandet, 2006; Smith and Wayman, 2009). For example, participants can experience a 'personal transformation' (O'Shea and Stone, 2011, p. 285); their views of the world and their place in it can change irreversibly (Mezirow, 2000; Daloz, 1999). In addition, there are evident intergenerational and other wider social benefits to all of us of more people engaged in learning (D*f*E, 2006; Wainwright and Marandet, 2006; Smith and Wayman, 2009).

Defining Transformation?

Illeris (2014) succinctly defines transformation as 'all learning that implies change in the learner' (p. 40). Most definitions also agree that the student transformed by participation in education will experience; a) a shift in basic premises of thought; b) a shift in feelings; c) a shift in actions; d) a shift in consciousness, and e) an altered way of being in the world (Hoggan, 2015, p. 64; Cranton, 2006). Transformative learning theory emerged from Mezirow's early research studies, where it was concluded that adult returners (non-traditional students) return to education following a *disorienting dilemma*, which could include *inter alia* divorce, redundancy or aspirations for a career change (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1981). They return with pre-existing *frames of reference* and *habits of mind* which determines how they see the world and their place in it – their worldview (Mezirow, 2000).

Participation in education presents the returning student with opportunities to engage in critical dialogue with peers and teachers, which when participated in meaningfully, encourages students to critically reflect on their often deeply entrenched beliefs and values (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Collini, 2012). Critical dialogue, in a formal learning environment, takes the shape of rational discourse – exploring new ideas with others, resulting in students 'trying on' new points of view (Mezirow, 2000, p. 12; see also Habermas, 1984).

Transformation occurs when a student adopts a new, more trustworthy, worldview following 'a fundamental questioning and reordering' of their pre-existing assumptions about how they 'think and act' (Brookfield, 2000, p. 139). A test of transformative learning is the extent to which new and unfamiliar ideas penetrate cultural entrenchment; the extent to which individuals become prepared to contemplate new ideas and refuse to be situated in ways that impede transformation (Mezirow, 2000). Trying on new ideas should fundamentally 'alter our very being, our beliefs, and our core sense of self'; experiencing transformations should begin to determine the future of 'how we live' and how we define our very existence (Tisdell, 2012, p. 22). Subsequently, it has been argued that to be considered transformative, change will be; a) *Persistent* – it is neither temporary nor reversible;b) *Pervasive* – it will impact all aspects of ones being and functioning, and; c) *Profound* – significant change will be experienced in 'ones perspective, understanding, ways of knowing and doing and ways of being in the world' (Anderson and Braud, 2011, p. xvii; *cf.* Blattner, 2013).

Method

The study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of the student's experiences and therefore a qualitative approach was adopted to capture the student voices and lived experiences (van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with twelve graduates (eleven female) of a BA degree facilitated in a Further Education College. Lasting between fifty-five and eight-five minutes, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. Participants also

developed structured reflections of their wider experiences; their compulsory education, family and work biographies, their 'learning journeys' generally and their possible experiences of transformation. Reflection questions were distributed and returned as email attachments. Data analysis was achieved by applying thematic coding (Saldana, 2009). Interviewees were recruited by purposively sampling participants whose experiences were congruent with the study aims (Cohen and Manion et al, 2000). Participants were briefed regarding the aims of the research, what would be expected of them, how the data would be collected and stored and, how the findings might be disseminated. All data was stored on a password protected PC. Informed consent forms were distributed, explained and questions invited before signing and being stored safely. We are aware that this research is merely a small slice of life study. As such, generalisations from the findings would be inappropriate.

Findings

Research has shown that negative experiences of compulsory education can have a consequent negative impact on students who return to HE in FE later in life (Gallacher and Crossan et al, 2002; Reay and Crozier et al, 2010). This was the experience of almost half the participants:

I was never very interested at school … I could not wait to get away from school and was really happy when it finally happened (Irene)

A number reported a lack of encouragement from both parents and teachers. For example:

I wasn't encouraged to study really by anybody that worked in the school, so I never did very well at school … (June)

… I had three brothers and it was more like the brothers had to get [education] *… But me!*

… They decided a hairdresser – [I] *could be a hairdresser …* (Lynne)

As Lynne observed, it is recognised that parents' attitudes to education can be quite gendered. Gendered attitudes continued to be encountered later when the participants married and became parents themselves. For example, Shelley's husband never,

… appreciated what I was trying to achieve. He is kind of old fashioned and sort of his thinking is like 'the wee woman stands at the sink doing the dishes or standing at the cooker or doing something like that' (Shelley)

Participants reported a number of challenges that impacted on learning once they had returned to HE in FE. For the most part, these challenges were related to caring responsibilities. For example, June is a single parent who has a daughter with a, *'life-limiting condition'*, that required 24-hour care. One of June's main challenges was recruiting family members to share some of the responsibilities, and then organising her time,

… I had to juggle my time and plan well in advance … I got a year planner, I worked out what days I was going to study … Who was going to look after [my daughter] *when I was going to study* (June)

Irene was in a similar position, despite her care responsibilities being for her mother, who was terminally ill, and her father who could not bathe or dress independently,

Every day I had to go round and had to help her dress and that is when she could get up and bathe. I had to sort out her oxygen machine and nebulisers, and her medication … My dad did not have a clue and I had to look after him as well … shopping, housework, the whole lot (Irene)

Guilt for neglecting the family was widely reported. For example, June stated that she,

… found it difficult … I felt sometimes I was neglecting [my daughter] *at times'* (June)

Janice experienced guilt as a difficult emotion. Guilt emerged from a feeling that she was neglecting the family and that achieving her degree was more important. Janice felt that she was putting her degree before her family if she, *'… wasn't continually supporting them'*. She reports that feelings of guilt were particularly strong when,

… [my youngest son] *would want me to spend more time with him and I would be getting child minders to take care of him, to try and catch up on work and try and get some reading in … a part of me thought that, 'I'm neglecting him, I'm not doing it right.' … there was no getting away from guilt* (Janice)

Mezirow's (1978a, 1978b, 1981) early research on transformative learning concluded that learning opens up the world to those who participate; effecting an alienation of old perspectives and the framing of new ones. Notwithstanding participants' experiences, which would all be recognised as barriers to learning, every participant interviewed, to varying degrees, experienced some level of transformation, as a consequence of their participation in HE in FE. Our first example is Elaine. Prior to returning to HE in FE, Elaine felt she was a, *'nobody … just somebody's mum, just somebody's wife'.* She now she reports a,

… much wider perspective; certainly, my perspective was quite narrow before because my experiences were quite narrow … I now see things in a much wider way … the world has opened up a lot for me … it's made me feel more like, I don't know (pause) *… that I have got something to give to society, if you like... I feel like I really have something to contribute now* (Elaine)

June now enjoys, '*political conversations'* with a teacher friend and thinks she has a lot more to offer. She now sees the world differently, reporting that,

I think differently now … I think more politically than I did before, much more. I had so much to be getting on with in my own life I didn't really consider much else … I'm a lot more confident as a person because I've done it. You know, I've got a degree and my best pal is a teacher – I always admired her, eh? That she was clever. But I've got a degree the same as her, so I must be clever as well … (June)

Before returning to education, Shelley's self-concept was expressed as a '*… downtrodden mother of three bairns...* [I] *just thought this is how life is''*. She now perceives herself as '*very able … I have grown into a very confident woman'* (Shelley). Never having previously taken an interest in politics, she has now taken a significant leadership and support role in her local community. After joining her local Tenants Association, she was soon voted as Chairperson. She has since travelled the country speaking at political meetings, highlighting issues faced by disadvantaged communities. A highlight was being asked to speak at the Scottish Parliament, '*something I thought that I would just never do'*. Reflecting on how far she has come,

… if somebody had said to me 'would you do that like ten years ago?'. I would have said 'don't be silly', speaking in front of 250 people … politicians, academics? … 'you are living on a different planet' … now, I think it's in my blood, I enjoy it (Shelley)

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to examine whether a) graduates from HE in FE can experience significant social, emotional, and intellectual growth as a result of participation and b) can growth be conceptualised as transformative? We argue that non-traditional students can experience particular difficulties when returning to education. These difficulties are centred mostly on caring responsibilities, but also on familial attitudes and feeling that they are guilty of neglecting caring responsibilities. Lack of preparedness for the rigours of academic study has also been identified in the literature as a significant challenge for non-traditional students. The participants in this research have indicated that they have experienced a significant shift in how they now perceive the world and their place in it. We argue therefore, in response to our first objective that participants have experienced significant social, emotional, and intellectual growth as a result of

participation in HE in FE. Although the quotes used were limited by the space available, they represent very typical, if not universal, experiences of the transformative potential of HE in FE.

The second objective explores if any significant growth can be conceptualised as transformative? Returning to the definition offered by Anderson and Braud (2011); they argue that change will be; a) *Persistent* – it is neither temporary nor reversible. In terms of this research, a follow-up study would be required to determine if transformation has either been sustained or built on. On their second point, that transformation should be *Pervasive* – it will impact all aspects of ones being and functioning. We believe this is borne out by the evidence. The quotes show a significant shift in the participants 'being' and 'functioning'. On the third point, that transformation should be *Profound* – significant change will be experienced in 'one's perspective, understanding, ways of knowing and doing and ways of being in the world'. Again, we argue that there can be little doubt that the participants experienced, and clearly articulate, significant shifts in understanding of who they now are and their place in the world, leading us to the conclusion that the growth reported by participants should be conceptualised as transformative.

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