Autobiographical reflection and perspective transformation in adult learners returning to study: Research in progress

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Abstract

Throughout the course of our learning careers we are at times presented with the opportunity to reflect on our lives, to consider the experiences and people that have contributed to the shaping of our sense of self, and to the expectation we subsequently have of ourselves and our potential capacity. Nelson (1994) suggests we have the potential to transform our perspective if we have been enabled to explore the schemas that have woven themselves into the fabric of our self-identity and to consider the impact this brings to our life and learning,. He speaks of this autobiographically reflective process as coming to imagine a future previously untold.

I have increasingly come to include autobiographical reflection as a learning tool for the learners with whom I work, predominantly women over forty returning to the workforce and formal learning. They speak of the journey of self-discovery they undertake through this process of self-reflection and the positive outcomes they come to recognise in their own lives. Once identified, named and acknowledged, a once limiting past can be reconciled to enable a new path of identity formation that allows learners to step into a future of possibility.

This paper draws on the writings of Nelson, Brookfield, Mezirow and Freire and examines the potential capacity of autobiographical reflection to foster perspective transformation among adult learners returning to study. It outlines the conceptual framework and methodology for a postgraduate thesis on the topic and seeks feedback on the proposed research design, which explores an under-researched topic in VET: In what ways can telling and reflecting on their story provide these learners with greater engagement in the learning process, and potentially promote more beneficial learning and vocational outcomes for these individuals, and through them to society?

Introduction

"… you need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours.
When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some
time, you are fierce with reality."

Florida Scott-Maxwell (1968)

This paper has been born of my own transformational learning path, and continues to inform and be informed by the process of inquiry that underpins its development. It is both the product and the dormant seed that holds within it undiscovered potential for unimaginable truths. It unashamedly has at its core the author's very intimate journey of self-discovery, drawing on what Brookfield (2005) calls critical pragmatism, grounded in both critical theory and ideology critique. It explores the individual and collective journey towards personal liberation and empowerment.

Throughout the course of my own adult learning career I have been presented with the opportunity to reflect on my life, to consider the experiences and the people that have contributed to the shaping of my sense of self, and to the expectation I subsequently have of myself, my potential capacity and my future. At each point, as I have been encouraged to explore the schemas that have woven themselves into the fabric of my self-identity and to consider the impact this brings to bear on my approach to life and learning, I have been impressed by the capacity the self- reflective process contains to transform perspective.

Drawing on my experience as course coordinator and facilitator of learning for mature-aged students - predominantly women returning to the workforce and formal learning in a Community Services environment, and in the Diploma of VET Practice for staff professional development - I hear many stories of expressed fear among students as they contemplate entry into the unknown and unfamiliar environment of adult learning. Some students speak of negative early educational experiences and relate a degree of pessimism regarding their (perceived) ability to successfully navigate further education. For many, the absence of family and social support is identified as a barrier to potential success as they tentatively step out on their new learning pathway. These discussions and my observations of the students that come through the door of my classrooms cause me to wonder about the environments in which these people have spent their formative and adult years, and to consider the ways in

which these external environments have impacted on their perceived capability and sense of self-identity.

As a result of my own educational experiences, I have come to include autobiographical reflection as a learning process for my students, and to recognise the profound benefits expressed by them. Students speak of the journey of self-discovery they undertake through the course of this self-reflection, and the outcomes they come to recognise in their own lives mirror the experiences of my own and the many individuals revealed in the literature review. They articulate the place of recognition they arrive at through undertaking and documenting the self-reflective process, and come to embrace a change in perspective that enables the preliminary identification and acknowledgement of previously unrecognised and unchallenged life views, and to allocate meaning to behaviours and attitudes that may have been carried with them for decades, but which can now be seen as dispensable. Once identified and acknowledged, these learners speak of being able to release un-owned and limiting beliefs and of opening themselves more fully to the possibilities inherent within their journey of adult learning. Through the self-reflective process of narrative they have come to understand, to make sense of, and to reconcile aspects of their past that have bound them to a sometimes narrow window of existence and of knowing. Through understanding more fully their capacity as lifelong learners on a new path of identity formation, they are able to step with personal authority into a future of previously unimagined possibility.

Literature review

At this point, I have concentrated on the work of Mezirow and Brookfield and examine the ways in which they name and identify transformation. I also draw on Nelson's narrative-based inquiry, and on the writings of Freire.

Mezirow

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning discusses the process an individual undertakes, ignited by a disorienting dilemma and leading to the questioning of long-held assumptions about themselves and the world around them. This critically reflective passage seems ultimately to bring about a reassessment, a renewed recognition or a completely transformed understanding of their ability to engage with and influence the differently perceived world, viewed through the lens of this new perspective. I will be looking for the key indicators that

Mezirow identifies as typically representative of an individual undergoing this process of perspective transformation.

He suggests that from a disorienting dilemma in one's life, a process of self-examination emerges, and a growing discontent and alienation from the traditionally accepted social norms and structures often develops. A greater critical awareness of others, both within and outside of the individual's morphing view of the world ensues that critiques previously accepted social roles and expectations, and the habitual ways in which these assumed roles were enacted. Reinterpretation and construction of meaning attached to these past experiences is integrated, and the growing awareness that the individual's own lived experience and discontent has been shared and acknowledged by others can support an openness and willingness to construct a new and unique frame of reference. Mezirow speaks of these new frames of reference as supporting and guiding action that can take the individual beyond any previously perceived horizon of their expectations. (Mezirow, 1994, 2000)

Brookfield

Brookfield supports Mezirow's assertion that critical reflection is part of the transformative learning process, but proposes that without the individual examining the power relationships and hegemonic assumptions that exist in their immediate and larger environment, transformation is unlikely to take place. He sees that transformation requires the critically reflective process to be politicised in order to identify the impact of ruling ideologies and social structures on one's agency, and suggests that transformative learning occurs when what was once seen to be permanent and stable is recognised by the individual as being relative and situation specific, and often shaped to accommodate the needs and interests of ruling others. (Brookfield, 2005)

Nelson

Nelson proposes that by reviewing and interpreting one's life story, one has the capacity to construct a new reality that can contain a strongly identified and enacted authorship of one's life course. He suggests that a transformed perspective can develop through the imaginative and critical process of autobiographical reflection. In imagining, the individual's conscious and unconscious domains of knowing are connected, and the ongoing critical analysis and synthesis of this inner and outer experience and knowing has the capacity to reshape previously inculcated behaviours and attitudes. He speaks of coming to imagine a future

previously unknown through undertaking the transformative process of narrative. (Nelson, 1994)

Freire

Freire problematises the inequalities inherent in the power relationships between the ruling classes and the "oppressed" discussed in his many works (Freire, 1974a, 1974b, 1985, 2000; Freire & Faundez, 1989). He proposes that in identifying and naming this inequality, the "oppressed" come to recognise and embrace a more equitable distribution of power and authority and that this change in perspective underpins the transformative learning process, which he refers to as "conscientization". He identifies the self-fulfilling prophesy of the "oppressed" and argues for the recognition – on the part of the educator and of the learner – of the capacity and potential contained within the individual. He asserts that relative to the personal authority and power they come to recognise and embrace, the "oppressed" are able to critique the social structures that have held them captive, and to exercise their individual and collective agency for democratic social change. Freire suggests, as does Brookfield, that through critically reflecting on the political aspects of their oppression, there arises within them a new opportunity for the creation of a transformed future.

I will be looking to discuss the presence of these recognitions and realisations with my research participants and to explore the impact on their potentially transformed perspectives.

Becoming agents of change

Mezirow (2000), Brookfield (2005), Nelson (1994) and Friere (2000) are some of the many writers who advocate the cultivation of a process through which we can interrogate what, why and how we have come to know, and who we have yet to become The process of learning about oneself is integral to the creation of effective, emotionally intelligent leaders in our communities (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002), and as people are able to name and define their own knowing, and to claim personal authority over their lives, a stronger sense of self-identity and self-determination arises that can lead to their creation as new agents of change. It is change at the individual and personal level that holds the potential for change at a societal level. In fostering the growth and personal authority of individuals, we are investing in the future leaders of our communities whose wisdom and courage will guide our tomorrows.

It appears significant, in my examination of the literature, that individual transformation may well be seen by many as a *precondition* for social transformation, but the former doesn't always or necessarily lead to the latter. There are many writers who suggest and support the proposition that adult education promotes individual growth and transformation, but many fewer argue that it does or should facilitate collective empowerment and social change. The literature on which I have focussed highlights the continuum that juxtaposes "transformative learning", with Mezirow and Nelson towards the "individual/personal" end, and Brookfield and Freire towards the "collective/social" end, and it bears further investigation, through the research study and in the development of the thesis, around the issue of whether these as yet inconclusive links can be explicitly identified.

My research

The purpose of this paper is to outline a research study I am undertaking towards a Master of Education by research at Monash University. As a novice researcher, I am hoping to open up the topic for discussion and to seek feedback from more experienced researchers in the field.

My research will explore the ways in which telling their story might enable these learners an opportunity to develop a more informed and insightful understanding of the circumstances that have shaped their perceptions of self-identity and authorship over their lives. It seeks to investigate the extent to which undertaking the narrative journey might foster a greater engagement in the learning process, and potentially promote more beneficial learning and vocational outcomes for them. Further, if this regenesis is experienced, can it lead to more powerful utility both at an individual and societal level? Through the drawing out of the stories, do these people come to discover previously unknown abilities that contain the power to transform not only their own lives, but that can contribute to positive change in the lives of others?

The anecdotal outcomes that have been observed and documented to this point regarding the benefits of participating in this reflective story-telling, indicates that the oft reported transformed perspective contains not only the capacity to positively influence the learner's fuller engagement in their own learning and career pathway, but it would appear to create previously unrealised opportunities for engagement and utilisation of personal agency within community and societal environments. The qualitative research, yet to be undertaken within

the VET sector, also holds potentially important implications for reconstructing curriculum design and delivery to promote greater transformational learning opportunities that are learner focussed and constructed on pedagogically sound foundations.

'The study of narrative seems to promise change, 'forc(ing) the social sciences to develop new theories and new methods and new ways of talking about self and society'
(Denzin, 2004: xiii, cited in Squire (2005)

My aim in undertaking the research is to rigorously examine three topics:

- The ways in which adults returning to study experience the process of autobiographical reflection and its potential capacity to foster perspective transformation.
- If this process is found to have positive learning and vocational outcomes, as reported by the participants, what might the implications be, not only for the individual, but also for their immediate community, and more broadly at a societal level?
- How might these findings shape future curriculum design and pedagogical practices within the VET sector to maximise teaching and learning outcomes for all stakeholders?

Research methodology

While my research is informed and framed by the ideas of the abovementioned writers, the methodology to be deployed falls within the narrative and interpretive traditions which foreground processes of individual and collective meaning making, and thereby empower research subjects to make sense of their own lived realities. The inquiry draws on what Brookfield (2005) calls critical pragmatism, grounded in both critical theory and ideology critique, and uses narrative as a tool to encourage participants to reflect on and critique their life experiences to this point.

Research questions

The research project will address the following questions:

1. In what ways can the process of autobiographical reflection foster perspective transformation among adult learners returning to study?

2. Can the potentially beneficial outcomes contained within this reported change in perspective extend beyond the individual to their immediate environment and further to society?

3. What are the potential implications of these potential outcomes on pedagogical approaches and curriculum design in vocational education and training?

Research design

The project will involve a qualitative research study of mature-aged adults returning to study in TAFE and seeks to explore the benefit of narrative as a tool for facilitating perspective transformation and the potential recognition of the benefits of ongoing and lifelong learning.

The participants

The participants will be adults returning to study in a Community Services course. All will undertake the reflective process as part of their program and I will provide a session on autobiographical reflection as a guest speaker. All class members will subsequently be invited to participate in my research study. Eight volunteers will be selected to participate in the study.

Proposed approach and timeframe

As indicated above, the concept of reflective writing will be introduced by me, as a guest presenter, to the students. This introduction will include:

- A shared discussion of prior experiences and current attitudes to learning,
- Linking the two concepts of past experience and current perspective.
- The reading of a sample reflective essay as an orientation to the concept of reflective writing.

Following this introduction, all students will be invited to participate in a series of reflective tasks:

- Keeping a reflective journal in the form of a portfolio of words, pictures, audio /audiovisual images, words or music for a period of 4 weeks.

- Drawing together the developing insights and understanding to construct a personal narrative - writing their own informally structured reflective essay, or developing a portfolio of written and other artefacts (e.g. photos, drawings) that help them to "make sense" of their past.

In line with ethical requirements, I will then introduce the research I am undertaking by providing prospective participants with an explanatory statement, outlining the broad process and time commitment required of participants, and a request will be issued for individuals to consider participating voluntarily in the study.

Data gathering

Once eight volunteers identify themselves, a group meeting will arranged to establish the theme and process of the project, clarifying the aims, design and participation requirements of the research, prior to them commencing the process of reflective writing, audio or visual imagery. Permission will be sought at the outset to use the information shared at this meeting as part of the data gathering process, and the eight participants will be asked to record their thoughts and insights in whatever way is resonant with them throughout the eight weeks of the data gathering period. This gathering and chronicling of thoughts and reminiscences is the tapestry from which the interpretive understandings will be drawn and discussed, and will found the reflective essay/portfolio. It is the potential insights and realisations arising from these foundational activities that holds the richest source of data, and accordingly, the journals and pictorial or audio chronicles will not be collected as part of the data gathering process. The data collection and later analysis will focus on the expressed understandings of the individual participants related to the reflective journey they have undertaken through the individual and group interviews. In a subsequent class, all students will have the opportunity to share their experience of the writing of their reflective essay, or of gathering artefacts for their portfolio, and critical reflections on my facilitation of this process and engagement with the adult learners will be noted to inform future research. I will keep my own reflections of these sessions which will be used as primary data.

Appointments will then be made with the eight participants for individual interviews. These interviews will provide the forum in which to explore the individuals' insights gained through the process of their reflective journey and to flesh out stories of the transformative

process. Nelson's (1994) autobiographical approach to personal and professional growth will be considered as a valid tool in enabling the telling of personal stories that might foster the emerging strength and insight of individuals and their capacity to respond with greater receptivity and openness to the educational opportunities before them. This approach will be the basis of the reflective intervention undertaken with the students, and will enable the exploration of the ways in which the transformative process unfolds for each of them.

Two weeks after the last individual interview has taken place, a focus group will be held with the eight participants to discuss and reflect on the ways in which the autobiographical process may have fostered the unfolding of stories and influenced their understanding, perspectives and learning. The opportunity will also be provided to reflect on changes of attitude or behaviour, in response to any recognised perspective transformation.

Participants will be followed up after 3 months to seek any new/further reflections or insights about the role of the autobiographical process in producing post-program outcomes. Has personal/professional growth and development (learning, vocational and perspective transformation) become apparent in the intervening time that was not experienced, recognised or manifested during the program?

In summary, primary data gathering will be drawn from:

- My personal reflections on the process of teaching the class of students over 2 sessions
- 1 collective session with eight participants who volunteer to participate in the study discussing autobiographical reflection
- 1 individual interview with each of the eight participants on their personal transformation gleaned from their reflective writing
- 2 focus groups with all eight participants – one face-to-face after individual interviews have concluded, and one 3 months after the first - on the autobiographically reflective process and its capacity to foster perspective transformation.

Data analysis

These interviews, both individual and group will be tape recorded, with supporting notes. Once transcribed, an analysis will be made of individual and groups responses to the autobiographical process and the nature of perspective transformation that may be visible in

their texts and discussions as documented by Mezirow and Brookfield. The analysis will consider the capacity of autobiographical reflection to achieve the identification of relationships between the potential reconciliation of past experience with current perception of participants, and their enhanced potential as lifelong learners and authors of transformed life stories.

The outcomes of these findings will be examined to determine the extent to which the inclusion of the reflectively autobiographical process within the design and delivery of future curriculum might be beneficial, and to evaluate the most appropriate format for these possible changes.

In closing

As indicated above, a broad conceptual framework and research design for this study have been sketched out and the introduction and literature review are currently taking shape. But the research is still in its early stages and all its elements remain open to change in response to new ideas and feedback from the VET research community. It is a challenging and, for me at least, significant topic that warrants more research than has been the case to date. In these times of rapid and uncertain change, the potential for VET to contribute to learner empowerment should be explored. My central thesis is that integrated processes of autobiographical reflection can assist adult learners, especially those returning to study, to better understand their personal histories and thereby achieve greater control over their futures through perspective transformation.

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