

EMBRACING CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION – A NECESSITY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Critical self-reflection is a cognitive and emotional process which can allow an individual to self identify, critique and revise long held personal assumptions that may have hindered potential for lifelong learning. When such obstacles are removed, lifelong learning can be enhanced, for individuals can deconstruct some long held assumptions and conceptualise new futures.

KEYWORDS

critical self-reflection – perspective
transformation – transformative learning

INTRODUCTION

More and more Australian adult learners are partaking in higher education. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) indicate that in 2006 there were approximately “984,100 students enrolled in higher education courses”, with 39% being aged 25 years or older. This figure shows a “3% increase in the number of higher education students from 2005 to 2006” and is indicative of a worldwide trend.

Furthermore, the ABS (2007, p. 1) indicates that educational attainment in Australia has been steadily rising, “up 48% from 1996”. They attribute this to the demand for greater skills levels required in an “increasingly technological workforce”.

Amongst the throng of adult learners embarking on higher education are those who for varied reasons, have been absent from educational contexts for a long period of time, and who may lack the appropriate skills to confidently commence their studies. To accommodate their needs, at a national level, Enabling, Bridging or Preparatory programs have been designed to assist adult learners to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to become successful undergraduate students. This paper examines the 13 week learning journey of a group of nine adults as they engaged in one such program, situated in a regional area typified by a low level of citizens in possession of higher education degrees. Many of the adult learners in the program were the first in their family to enter the higher education context, and as such, experienced varying levels of support, encouragement, trepidation and lack of confidence. Many alluded to past experiences that remained a hindrance to their lifelong learning potential. What this paper specifically seeks to achieve is a better understanding of the role that critical self-reflection can play in exploring the ways in which the adult learners

were able to articulate critical self-reflections of self-as- learner. Drawing upon research from a doctoral thesis, it analyses data based upon a series of interviews. An indication of critical self-reflection is understood in terms of how these learners were able to talk about the (often emotion-laden) assumptions that they had of self-as-learner, and how, in some cases, they were able to transcend these beliefs through a process of rationalisation. Such knowledge hopes to highlight the importance of pedagogical practices that support opportunities for adult learners to engage in critical self-reflection.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical self-reflection

A return to formal study can to be stressful for many adults. Amongst other reservations, adult learners may often have less than positive associations with regards to past formal educational experiences, harbouring negative, long-held assumptions about self-as-learner. Such assumptions are likely to impact upon individual learning potential, although the belief that adult learners have negative views of themselves as learners is, in itself, an assumption. However, when adult learners are given opportunities to articulate their previously unquestioned long-held beliefs about self-as learners, they can provide some insight into the assumptions they hold. One way this process can be facilitated is through critical self –reflection.

Critical self-reflection involves critical, focused questioning that can challenge one’s existing assumptions, values and beliefs about one’s motives, actions and responses. In acting as a valuable tool in changing perceptions of self-as-learner, it can be argued that that it can also be instrumental in developing one’s potential for learning. Cranton (2002, p. 65) identifies ‘critical self-reflection’ as one of seven inter-connected and iterative facets of perspective transformation. These facets include: an activating event; articulation of assumptions; critical self-reflection; opening self to alternative viewpoints; engagement in discourse and dialogue; revision

of assumptions; and acting on revisions. The facets combine to result in a change of perspective, or as Mezirow (1978) first used it, perspective transformation. In the context of perspective transformation, critical self-reflection entails not only articulating assumptions, but “questioning and examining assumptions in terms of where they came from, the consequences of holding them, and why they are important” (Cranton, 2002, p. 66).

To engage in critical self-reflection requires a degree of honesty, contesting long held beliefs that in the past may have afforded a degree of safety and surety. Being critically self-reflective can be a somewhat dichotomous, emotion laden experience, one that can entail degrees of grief and regret, elation and empowerment and liberation and illumination. From this perspective, as part of the wider context of transformation of the individual, critical self-reflection needs to be understood as an emotional journey as much as a cognitive, rational process (Cranton & Roy, 2003). In addition, given that much of the process is internal and the students themselves may not always be conscious of the changes taking place, critical self-reflection must be remembered for its sometimes insidious nature.

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is sometimes rather generally referred to as learning from the cradle to the grave, and for the purposes of this paper, it is seen to include “any formal, non-formal and informal educational experiences designed to provide education to individuals to enable them to function in different contexts” (Maruatona, 2006, p. 553). Although debate arises as to the specific audience to whom lifelong learning is directed (Jarvis & Holdord, 2006, p.546), and which political ideologies are perpetuated, it remains a somewhat contentious descriptor that is often used synonymously with adult education. Rather, this author interprets lifelong learning as any learning, formal and informal, gained along life’s many journeys, the findings described in this paper being one such journey.

METHODOLOGY

The research design was informed by qualitative paradigm that utilised words as data, gathered from a series of group and individual interviews provided by nine voluntary participants as they engaged in a thirteen week pre-university preparatory program. The participants were part of a class of 25 students who engaged in the face to face mode of a program. A Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis provided a means by which instances of the ways in which students

positioned themselves as learners in a broader context were made obvious. Upon transcription of the data, categorical analysis, which ‘involves the systematic organization of data into groupings that are alike, similar or homogeneous’ (Rose & Sullivan, 1996, p. 232) proved a starting point for the production of descriptive categories, and facilitated the development and application of ‘codes to the data’ (Lanshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 271). This process aimed to find relationships amongst the data and then to logically categorise those relationships.

Through the iterative process of examination and probing, it provided a means by which data could be collated and examined more specifically. It also allowed for categories to emerge from the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Such a means of analysis provided the basis for generating some explanatory propositions that are presented and discussed in this paper. It enabled me to examine instances where the participants identified long held assumptions about self-as learner, how possible evidence of critical self-reflection occurred, and in some cases, how new perspectives of self-as- learners may have been instrumental in conceptualising new futures as a lifelong learner.

RESULTS

The process of critical self-reflection can be an unsettling experience, one that can lead to changed perceptions of self. Evidence from the data in this study suggests that for some of the adult participants in the 13 week pre-university preparatory program, this was the case. Indeed, the learning journey proved not only to be one that delved into the mechanics and techniques of academic writing and mathematics, but also one of self-discovery and opportunities to critically self-reflect. Some participants were able to articulate assumptions they previously held about self-as-learner and data indicated that some came to revise long held assumptions at various points throughout the program. Some identified the influence of ‘significant others’ when it came to the assumptions that they held of self-as-learner. Others referred to a variety of key people who had influenced their self-perceptions; one talked about family members who had always made her feel inferior and less intelligent, while another mentioned a teacher who had mocked his creative writing attempts and humiliated him in front of his peers. It appeared these assimilated assumptions had in some cases become self-fulfilling prophecies, ones that constantly and powerfully dictated many directions in subsequent life choices and decisions of the participants. Other participants indicated that

.their lack of confidence as a learner in a formal learning situation was the result of damaging school experiences. Interestingly, most of the adult participants could articulate an explanation for why some prior learning experiences may not have been of a positive nature.

Data revealed that at the outset of the preparatory program, many of the participants held negative assumptions about themselves as learners, using emotive vocabulary including such self-descriptors as 'silly', 'stupid' 'hopeless' and 'scared'. However, the intervention of activities that involved the adults having to engage in critical self-reflection, such as identifying learning styles and temperament types, may have provided the impetus for critical self-reflection. In providing opportunities for the students to specifically identify and understand how they functioned as learners, and how it is that each individual possesses their own unique learning preferences and styles, it is possible that a change occurred with regards to how they viewed self-as-learner. Closer scrutiny of the data revealed that the assumptions some of the participants held about self-as-learner did indeed undergo a change throughout the program. At a rudimentary level, this is evidenced in their utilisation of a more proactive vocabulary, evidenced later in the program by their words, such as 'confident', 'positive', 'special' 'excited' and 'less judgemental' when referring to their own learning capabilities. Such a contrast in vocabulary from that used at the outset of the 13 week journey could be said to provide compelling evidence that a change in assumptions about self-as-learner did indeed occur for some of the participants.

Preliminary findings

The preliminary findings provide an indication of critical self-reflection, understood in terms of how the participants (pseudonyms used) discussed their assumptions of self-as-learner. When participants articulated their beliefs, they provided insights into the assumptions they held, and came to critique. Bert was a participant who made an assumption about the nature of formal learning environments. In revealing a sense of vulnerability, it appeared that that due to past experiences, he made the assumption that a return to a formal learning environment would be a threatening experience for him. It appeared that he had based this assumption on past experiences and his words indicated the negative influence this assimilated assumption had for his potential for lifelong learning. He revealed:

I never really expressed my view and probably that goes back to Grade 4 and the humiliation I felt then. I never wanted to go

through that again so I never opened up and gave my views about what I thought about something. I thought it I would be hurt again.

However, later data revealed that perhaps as a result of Bert being able to firstly articulate this assumption and secondly, engage in critical self-reflection, Bert's assumption about the nature of formal learning environments was challenged, and as a result, may have changed:

Coming in and doing STEPS has challenged my mind and it's actually getting me out there and opening up into something I haven't been doing for many years. I have actually felt nurtured in here

Bert made a further assumption about what would transpire if he expressed himself in words, both written and spoken within the classroom context. He assumed that he would be exposed to humiliation if he opened up to others. He said:

I thought, "This is going to open up something and I don't want to be embarrassed or ashamed or stuff like that."

However, over a period of time, it became apparent that Bert came to revise his assumption that he would be hurt if he expressed himself to others, and revealed the very personal journey he took as he deconstructed this particular assumption:

Coming into STEPS has forced me to look differently at some things I have never looked at before. I have really enjoyed writing. I'm not so self-conscious about what I write now...it's helped me a lot...really picked up my self confidence.

It appeared that he no longer held the assumption that opening up would not mean pain.

Barb was a participant who appeared to hold the assumption that her classmates' behaviours would quite simply replicate her own, and her lack of tolerance of others was expressed quite vehemently:

I felt like punching people's lights out when they were thoughtless and rude. We had a lot of rudeness and comments that were unfair and people were demanding. There was a lot of bickering and lack of tact being displayed in our classroom.

Her assumption however appeared to change considerably, for data gathered later in the program indicated that her assumption about the behaviours of others had changed:

I have learnt more about people and how they do things and why. They've got different values, or different roles in their lives and sometimes you've got to just sit back and accept who they are. Everyone is

different and I see that in a lot of people now.

It appeared that critically reflecting on the behaviour of others had allowed Barb to change about her assumption of others being just like her.

Barb also articulated the belief that for various reasons, she felt inferior to her family members, making the assumption that they purposefully excluded her by undermining her intellectual capacity. She gave some insight into how this assumption had stymied her learning potential:

Before coming here [STEPS], I wouldn't even give an intellectual view if I was with them [family]. If I was with them I tended to sit back because I wasn't educated as much as them, and they spoke with these big words, sometimes purposefully just to patronise me.

Critical self-reflection quite possibly afforded Barb the opportunity to deconstruct the assumption she held with regards to her feelings of inferiority. She was able to conceptualise a different assumption about why it was that she felt her family did not include her. She revealed:

Here [STEPS] I feel part of something and I've learnt that I'm...just a different personality...and that that is okay. Maybe they were threatened by my ability to just take off and just do whatever I want.

A sense of liberation was evident in Barb's revised assumption, and she came to appreciate that it was acceptable to be different to her family members. It could be argued that this revelation enhanced her potential for lifelong learning.

A further assumption Barb articulated was that because of her past work history and experiences, she did not consider herself worthy or intellectually capable of a university education. Furthermore, her words revealed the inner turmoil she experienced as she questioned her right to be in the pre-university context. She assumed she was a misfit in this context:

On the first day [of STEPS] I reflected: Would anyone notice that I was a lowly shopkeeper trying to masquerade as a higher more intelligent being? You can't do this! Haven't you looked in the mirror lately: You're blonde, 41, sickly child and frankly I don't think you'll cut it.

A period of time lapsed before Barb's assumption about her suitability and ability in the educational context changed. It appeared that some degree of critical self-reflection had precipitated a change:

I'm not stupid, and I have shocked myself how I'm taking things in and achieving things. The big thing that I've learnt that's giving me confidence to go on is to realise that NO. I'm not stupid!

In dispelling the assumption that she was not 'smart' enough engage in the pre-university context, she no longer abided by the assumption that had previously restricted her potential for lifelong learning.

Rita was a participant who, because of her age, assumed she would be unlikely to experience success in the pre-university context. She made assumptions based on her age and capabilities, self-doubt obvious in her words:

Am I too old? I must be crazy to even contemplate huge changes at this time of my life. What are my capabilities?

However, over the passage of time, the assimilated assumption of Rita's, that age would determine her success or lack thereof, came to change and she revealed:

I am finding that I am doing better than I ever thought I was capable of. There's nothing that will stop what I want to do now...I never thought I was stupid but I never thought I would achieve what I have achieved.

In critiquing an assumption through the process of critical self-reflection, it was obvious that Rita came to hold a revised assumption about her abilities, and in so doing, it appeared that her potential for lifelong learning was unleashed.

DISCUSSION

These findings are significant from a theoretical as well as a pedagogical perspective. Firstly, the study validates Cranton's (2002) work in that it shows that the articulation of assumptions is an integral aspect of perspective transformation. Whilst critical self-reflection is, for the most part, an internal process, there were tangible examples of how participants in this study expressed their changing views of self-as-learner. In articulating these assumptions, the participants invariably scrutinized their beliefs, and sometimes gave poignant insights into how, over varying periods of time, their views of self-as-learner changed in some way. As Cranton's (2002) theory suggests, the process of articulation of assumptions can help students clarify their thinking and facilitate the process of revising previously-held beliefs about self-as-learner.

Secondly, the findings from this study have important implications for all educational programs that are designed to prepare adult learners for tertiary study. Opportunities for students to talk about – in written or oral forms –

their learning journeys and their views of themselves as learners can encourage critical self-reflection. Explorations of self-as-learner can be a significant step in helping adult learners identify and question previously held perspectives and engage in a process to demystify such perspectives. Educators involved in programs designed to prepare adult learners for university need to recognise the value in providing such opportunities as a catalyst for change, and more significantly, for unshackling the chains that could be hindering lifelong learning potential.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented critical self-reflection as a valid step in critiquing individuals' longheld assumptions that may have hindered their lifelong learning potential. In utilising the words of a group of adult learners as they engaged in a program that challenged them to articulate and deconstruct assumptions about self-as-learner, some insight has been provided to suggest that critical self-reflection may well be invaluable in conceptualising new futures in lifelong learning.

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