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(2018)

All-singing, all-dancing experiences? Interrogating the discourse of transformation in undergraduate education.

In Wache, D & Houston, D (Eds.) *Research and Development in Higher Education: (Re)Valuing Higher Education*, 41.

Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc, Australia, pp. 151-161.

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Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc

Research and Development in Higher Education: **[Re] Valuing Higher Education**

Volume 41

Refereed papers from the
41st HERDSA Annual International Conference

2-5 July 2018
Convention Centre, Adelaide, Australia

Meth, D. (2018). All-singing, all-dancing experiences? Interrogating the discourse of transformation in undergraduate education. In D. Wache and D. Houston (Eds.), *Research and Development in Higher Education: (Re)Valuing Higher Education*, 41 (pp 151 - 161). Adelaide, Australia, 2-5 July 2018.

Published 2018 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 6106, Hammondville, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN 1441 001X
ISBN 978-0-908557-96-7

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DIISR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence and they reviewed the full paper devoid of the authors' names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Papers were reviewed according to specified criteria, including relevance to the conference theme and audience, soundness of the research methods and critical analysis, originality and contribution to scholarship, and clear and coherent presentation of the argument. Following review and acceptance, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

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All-singing, all-dancing experiences? Interrogating the discourse of transformation in undergraduate education.

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Abstract

Drawing on findings from in-depth qualitative research exploring academics' views on tensions in undergraduate education at one English university, this paper presents evidence of a complex and somewhat confused discourse related to the concept of transformation. As a fundamental aspiration of undergraduate education, assumed underpinnings of transformative learning theory, or transformational critical pedagogies lend kudos to the term, and such educational approaches are endorsed by academics as ideal. However, research evidence points to other more instrumental interpretations of transformation situated within the marketised higher education environment, with parallels to the much-maligned 'student experience' discourse.

Acknowledging that individual transformations may happen outside of university, and noting increasing public concerns around the value of university studies given rising costs, what then is the nature of transformation that is promised through undergraduate education? In seeking to clarify the purpose and value of undergraduate higher education and the nature of transformations we might wish to see in graduates, it is critical that educationalists and policymakers alike acknowledge the multiple interpretations and ideological tensions implicit in using such terminology and consider more carefully the ways in which such language is used.

Keywords: transformation; higher education discourse; marketisation

Introduction

Once, under the guidance of the academic, the undergraduate had the potential to be transformed into a scholar, someone who thinks critically, but in our consumer society such 'transformation' is denied and 'confirmation' of the student as consumer is favoured (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009, p.277).

This quote is one example of many similar statements dominating critical literature around higher education (HE), reflecting the myriad vested interests in, and expectations of, HE today. Many of these have been linked to increased market forces and increasingly dominant neoliberal ideologies (Field, 2015, p.115; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p.20). In a teaching and learning context, this manifests as value for money expectations, and notions of the use value of undergraduate education as a product (Trowler, 2003, p.84; Marginson, 1997, p.13).

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This has implications for curricula and pedagogies (Field, 2015; Williams, 2013; Filippakou, 2011; Sabri, 2010; Barnett and Coate, 2005). Heralding this shift in the educational discourse, a new homogenised, measurable and marketable entity, the student experience, is defined and measured on its success across areas as wide-ranging as estates, student skills and employability (Docherty, 2011; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2011; Sabri, 2011). As such, expectations of academics to contribute to the delivery of an excellent 'student experience', with an ever-expanding skills and employability agenda, continue to increase (Sabri, 2010, p.197). According to Field (2015), this "threatens to counteract the passion many academics feel about their teaching" (p.115) with implications for the nature of students' transformations. This is interpreted by Barnett (2000) as part of the instrumentalist shift from "transformation-as-emancipation to transformation-as-sheer-performance" (p.32).

Following on the heels of a growing 'student experience' discourse, I have observed a growth in use of the terms 'transformation' and 'transform' in HE, particularly within strategy and marketing discourses. An online search in relation to UK universities in 2015 revealed their inclusion in a range of university policy and marketing materials. For example: a mission statement "Transforming education, transforming lives" (University of Wales, Trinity St David) and a Students' Union strategy "Transforming students' lives and enhancing employability" (Warwick University). Aside from alluding to critical thinking and scholarliness (opening quote), and notions of transformed futures for students in examples above, most authors do not elaborate on what constitutes transformation in an undergraduate context. This is also likely to depend heavily on the interests and underlying ideological stances of those judging the transformation. Before outlining the path of research undertaken to explore this more deeply, it is useful to explore the range of definitions in the educational discourse more deeply.

Exploring definitions

Defined as "a marked change in form, nature, or appearance" (Oxford Dictionaries online, 2014), and usually in a "complete" and "good way" (Merriam-Webster online, 2014), 'transformation' as it relates to students in HE, is almost constantly used in an aspirational light (Ashwin, McLean and Abbas, 2012, p.4; Collini, 2012, p.187; Docherty, 2011, p.53; Sabri, 2011, p.664). Because of this, it becomes easy to use repeatedly. Illeris (2014a) notes "a growing uncertainty" about the concept of transformative learning and danger that:

the concept gradually assumes the nature of a ... liquid signal or buzzword without any clear meaning ... a positive expression which can be used for whatever purpose to support any hidden interest (p.15).

Transformative learning theory, encompassing processes which bring about deep learning, has been defined as distinct from more shallow, instrumental learning processes (Mezirow, 1997, 1990). Specifically, transformation is linked to a change in students' perspectives related to knowledge, with space for critical reflection and integration of knowledge and ideas, and opportunities to present and apply new perspectives (Johansson and Felten, 2014, p.43; Mezirow, 1990, p.12). This links to notions of scholarliness (Ashwin, 2014, p.123) requiring a critical combination of students being motivated to engage with the process, as well as good teaching to engender their engagement (Ashwin et al., 2012, p.7).

Meyer and Land (2005) conceptualise a suite of definitive threshold concepts within a discipline, with a set of clear endpoints (p.375). Within this process, learners may spend time in liminal "stuck places" which can themselves be transformative while learners come to terms with conceptual challenges and new knowledge (ibid.). Beyond transformation as deep engagement with disciplinary knowledge, other interpretations expand on more individual or social and outwardly-focused elements.

Dirkx believes that deeper learning integrates personal subjectivities, identity and experiences of the outer world (Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton, 2006, p.126). This shifts the focus from disciplinary knowledge (ibid.) to an “emancipatory” perspective, where the individuals’ view is broadened (Johansson and Felten, 2014, p.43; Dirkx et al., 2006, p.124; Mezirow, 1990, p.18). Models which emphasise “continuous growth and flexibility” have become more dominant (Illeris, 2014b, p.160), embodying the principles of lifelong learning, where learners continue to have the capacity to keep transforming i.e. more related to self and identity than knowledge. Some researchers note that this may be interpreted in instrumental terms, where individuals adapt to the demands of society (Dirkx, 1998, p.1), and develop “more productive and efficient workforces” (Field, 2006, p.3), tending towards the “transformation-as-sheer-performance interpretation noted earlier” (Barnett, 2000, p.32).

Since Freire (1970) there has been a rise in popularity of critical pedagogy, and education which emphasises consciousness-raising, leading learners to use their knowledge and education for action and the social good (Cowden and Singh, 2013; Mayo, 2013; Dirkx, 1998). Underpinning this, critical theory, “an interdisciplinary way of knowing the world that is oriented towards both understanding and improving it” (Amsler, 2013, p.198), sees societal transformation effected through interactions between critical thinking and actions. Embodied within this transformation is part of the transformational learning concept where students “...no longer merely interpret the world differently but actually do something substantive to change things” through social action (Docherty, 2011, p.52) as transformative agents in society (Harvey, 2000, p.3).

Underpinning issues of defining and using the term transformation, lie debates on the aims of HE and underlying ideological tensions, whether for individual or social transformation (Mezirow, 1990, p.363) or with a greater instrumentalist slant for consumer and market-related purposes (Barnett, 2000, p.32; Dirkx, 1998, p.1). Such tensions will be reflected in elements of undergraduate education through which such transformations might take place, chiefly curricula and pedagogies. It is therefore important to take time to surface how, in what way, and in whose interests this term is now used.

Academics are seen as key to students’ abilities to engage with knowledge in transformative or instrumental ways, both as curriculum developers and through pedagogical approaches (Cowden and Singh, 2013; Ashwin et al., 2012, p.4; Barnett, 2009, p.438). As such, a qualitative case study was undertaken between 2014 and 2016 as part of doctoral research (Meth, 2016) exploring academics’ views on tensions in undergraduate HE at one English research-intensive university.

Research methods

To capture a rich picture of academics’ experiences and perceptions, 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with academics from across all faculties at the university. Following literature analysis of disciplinary classifications which noted tensions in the perceived use value of, and threats to certain disciplines, sampling ensured that a full spread of disciplines across those defined as either pure or applied and hard or soft (Neumann, Parry and Becher, 2002; Biglan, 1973) was gained. Informants were handpicked as “experienced insiders” (O’Leary, 2010, p.170) for their experience in reflection and commentary on learning and teaching, sometimes in leadership roles. This purposive sampling aimed for balance across gender and career stage, and to reduce bias and bring balance to the process and findings, four academics were randomly selected providing they met the sampling criteria above.

Drawing on the opening proposition by Molesworth et al., (2009) that transformation is now denied in our consumer society (p.277), interviews explored academics’ views on their beliefs

on the purpose of HE, the meaning of transformation, and elements in the system that they felt enabled or denied what they believed to be an ideal undergraduate education. The combination of my own observations and critical intent as insider/outsider-researcher, the location within a complex HE environment, and the expectation on academics that they discuss links between their beliefs, practices and external structures, lent a critical emancipatory element to the research. This placed the research within a critical realist paradigm aligning with Bhaskar's (1993) interlinking of human agency and social structures (p.155) whilst allowing for humanist tendencies and a weak social constructivism (Layder, 1990, p.9).

Interviews were transcribed and first stage thematic analysis undertaken through a free coding exercise in NVivo™. A second stage clustering of themes further refined the analysis. Whilst the research yielded a wide range of findings, to further explore issues introduced above, this paper focuses specifically on academics' interpretations of the term 'transformation' and subsequent interrogation of its use.

Research findings

Interpretations

Whilst most academics interviewed had not used the term transformation much before, they believed it was appropriate for describing changes they would wish to observe taking place in students during their undergraduate study. Given its aspirational nature and complex interpretations highlighted above, this is unsurprising.

Academics interpreted transformation as "multi-faceted" (Academic L, History) and fluid. It was felt that there need not be specific start and end points, and it likely occurred across the life course, linking to lifelong learning sentiments. Academic C (French) did not interpret lifelong learning in an instrumental way, taking pains to qualify a wider endeavour than simply linked to the market:

it certainly shouldn't be reduced to that sense of leaving with a degree that gives you a job ... It should be something that feeds you for the rest of your life. ... it shouldn't be seen as a closed process.

Several academics noted that individuals' transformations start before coming to university, for example, Academic R (Medicine) stated:

I would argue that the transformation has actually commenced before they get to medical school, because they have had to develop ... and articulate a number of the qualities as a given

and the point was made by many, that transformation is not only within the undergraduate years, but can also be 40 years later (Academic N, Sociology) and sometimes understood retrospectively. Overall, there was a sense that transformation was a concept larger, in both timescale and characteristics, than an undergraduate experience in itself.

Academics recognised that many opportunities outside HE could lay claim to transformational experiences. Academic M (English) noted that HE was merely "one of a number" of experiences that could elicit transformations, and citing examples, Academic N (Sociology) commented that "some of the biggest, greatest, most wonderful transformations have taken place despite, not because of the educational institution". Differentiating aspects of transformation which occur as part of the normal life-course, for example maturing and gaining confidence, from those specifically developed through HE is important, and may help to clarify

what transformations researchers are accusing universities of no longer effecting (Molesworth et al., 2009, p.277).

What makes transformation in Higher Education unique?

Intellectual independence and scholarship

When asked what was different about transformation through a university experience, Academic F (Philosophy) noted:

I think intellectual independence really. Ability to tackle the intellectual projects and with a ... clarity of mindedness ... it's not ... personal independence.

And Academic M (English) noted:

a certain sort of confidence [which is] partly about ... three years of life experiences [but also due to] something that happens in the course that is part of that process. ... what I'm recognising is an academic trait, you know, something that's ... to do with that area of learning.

All academics' noted the aims of HE as requiring a critical pairing of deep engagement with the knowledge of a discipline and through this, the development of academic approaches. Coupled with their views on transformation in undergraduate education noted above and pedagogic approaches discussed in interviews, I interpreted their perceptions as falling within the range of transformative learning pedagogies outlined by Dirkx (1998) and linked to constructivist teaching approaches.

Since the opening quote (Molesworth et al., 2009, p.277) addresses the idea that transformation into a scholar is increasingly denied, it is worth noting academics' views on this. They noted that scholar was not "such a fashionable word" (Academic M, English), or to be used "in the context of undergraduate students" (Academic L, History). If used in this way, it needed to be "in the broader sense ... someone who's able to do their own research and thinking with a body of knowledge" (Academic F, Philosophy). Academic M said: "I don't look at the third years and think 'look at these scholars'. I tend to think of them ... going through a process of engaging very very deeply with something".

Academic J (Town Planning) said:

we probably aren't producing many scholars ... I'm not totally sure that's a bad thing ... you've gotta ask why we would want to produce scholars in the first place and what those people would go into?

This alludes to debates above on use value ascribed to education, and transformation with an end purpose related either to society or more instrumental ends.

Professional identity

For some professionally accredited courses, academics were overt about students' development of a professional identity, and this was particularly the case in medicine and speech science, two courses funded by the National Health System (NHS). Academic R (Medicine) was the only academic to raise the concept of transformative learning in interviews, believing it was integral to "transformation into a professional identity" as a "healthcare professional". Returning to definitions explored earlier, this could however be construed as

tending towards Barnett's (2000) concept of "transformation-as-sheer-performance" (p.32), and intimately linked to courses aiming to produce accredited, employable graduates.

Maturing as learners and individuals

Alongside intellectual endeavour are seen personal transformations. Academic N noted:

Personal change is ongoing all the time. ... many of those transitions are ... probably more important to students than the actual educational.

All academics observed how with increasing age and maturity, students grew as learners in how they think and act finding "confidence and direction" (Academic H, Chemistry). Drawing all aspects above together, Academic J (Town Planning) summed up well the facets of transformation seen in students through their undergraduate years:

They develop these passions and ... quite intense knowledge and interests in particular subjects ... They're grown up, they're more serious, they have knowledge, and they have an ability to be critical, and conceptual.

Citing Freud, Academic S (Speech Science) linked transformation to "freedom as a human [which] comes from awareness of one's own motivations" and noted:

it's the gaining of awareness for, 'why is this happening at this point, and what it might mean in terms of things that have happened to me before and in the future?' So coming to do something like a degree has to be transformative. ... in terms of the content, the material, the thinking, the subject, reaching a point of ... personal paradigm shift ... some level of reflexivity.

Discussion: Exploring tensions in the discourse

Some academics challenged use of the term transformation, noting that it was a "big claim" to make (Academic N, Sociology), that could also be construed as "glib or possibly even arrogant" taking on a sense of "Ah, come here and we will transform you" (Academic M, English), and taking the dictionary definition quite literally noted that "it suggests that you've absolutely changed from one form into another" (Academic N, Sociology).

As with the 'student experience' being used as a noun to describe an entity, this links to the way in which the word 'transformation' is used as a fixed notion, or action as in 'transform', rather than an adjective to describe learning, or change, as in 'transformative' or 'transformational'. Similarly, discussing use of the term 'scholar', Academic M (English) noted that "the adjective's quite appealing in the way that maybe the noun isn't". The use of such nouns tend to set up "unproductive" polarised positions, such as scholars versus consumers in the opening quote, where the reality is not as clear-cut (Muller and Young, 2014, p.128). The same interpretation may be extrapolated to the term 'transformation' set at opposing ends to an implied negative consumer-related change.

Many different transformations

Defining the concept as a homogenous entity minimises any recognition that students themselves, and the contexts in which they are studying will influence the changes that might occur. Echoing researchers' criticisms of the now homogenised 'student experience', Academic J (Town Planning) noted the importance of not assuming a homogeneity to students'

transformations. Academic L (History) noted how it will be “different for different students ... sometimes the experience might be very transformative, and sometimes it’s not”. An important factor influencing students’ transformations, is the degree to which students are able to, or choose to engage intellectually in their “personal projects” (Jary and Lebeau, 2009, p.701; Dubet, 2000, p.99), and Academic M (English) noted that academics cannot take responsibility for, or lay claim to all changes seen in students. Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2016) further evidence that transformative undergraduate experiences take place through the critical pairing of students’ social and educational experiences (p.975).

Academics also recognised that transformations might be different at non-research-intensive universities, where students would receive potentially less theoretical disciplinary grounding, with a higher proportion of practical and technical elements. Academic H (Chemistry) noted that such universities:

will turn them into a very different beast ... at the end of it in terms of a student, they would be much more technical based, which I don’t think is neither a good thing nor a bad thing, it’s just a different thing

Whilst Academic H did not see a tension in this statement, some interpretations outlined above would align this transformation with a more market-driven instrumental ideology, akin to the loss of scholars and an increase in producing consumers described at the outset of this paper, raising questions of the purpose and value of HE.

In whose interests?

Relating to tensions around the purpose, nature and shape of HE, academics noted conflicts in interpreting ‘transformation’ as a concept. Linking skills and transformation, Academic N (Sociology) noted:

I think the emphasis has been very much on learning things like transferable skills, so it’s transforming people so that they can have a set of skills, they can use them in the wider world, and they can identify and articulate those skills. Is that actually transformative? I don’t know.

Comments from academics such as “we are not training up job fodder ... submissive workers ... for the next ... generation” (Academic C, French) evidence their concerns around a growing skills and employability agenda, and expectations to make this explicit in students’ education. Tending towards the “self-as-skills-bundle” (Urciuoli, 2008), additional opportunities deemed necessary by some academics as part of “packages” in the marketed institutional offer were felt to have strayed from a more academic “exciting” interpretation of transformation towards more individualised notions of increased “student horizons” and “life prospects” (Academic V, Law). Clegg, Stevenson and Willott (2010) note how such extra-curricular activities are now audited as part of the “normative gaze of the institution” (p.624) and these were also highlighted in the opening paragraphs as part of a new marketised student experience.

In addition to the multiple interests and values outlined above, Academic N (Sociology) also noted that parents’ expectations of transformations may potentially be at odds with those of academics:

parents are concerned that if that much money is being spent, they want their son or daughter to come out with something that does transform them, that turns them into a highly employable graduate. But is that the sort of transformation that we talk about as academics? Maybe some academics.

These comments reveal tensions around interpretations of transformation, potentially in conflict with providing the UG education academics aspire to, and requiring that students gain something over and above their education that might lead to improved employment prospects beyond university.

Academic N (Sociology) linked usage of the term 'transformation' by universities to the marketised HE environment, noting their need to articulate transformations as "incredibly special" (original emphasis) "added extra" "all-singing all-dancing" experiences. During the period of this research, but post-interviews, the case university set an institutional strategic goal to provide opportunities for students to transform, through learning and other means (direct quote anonymised), and as part of summer 2015 recruitment, introduced the strapline "Transform" to their marketing materials for prospective students. Watts (2017) documents the ever-increasing sums spent by universities on branding and marketing aiming to convey both 'purpose and distinctiveness' (p.201).

Academic N noted that education "has to be about something more than a glamorous good experience with a transformative something or other at the end", akin to what Docherty (2011, p.53), refers to as "selling education as kitsch".

I really strongly believe this is market forces. ... It's there to make us buy a product, to make us feel good. To make us feel this is the answer. ... you can't marketise the heart of learning (Academic N).

Lost in translation?

Academic N further noted that in packaging and selling transformations, the real message about the value of HE, that "sometimes learning isn't pleasant ... it is about having a go, and sometimes getting it wrong, and practicing and slogging through stuff, and feeling uncomfortable and working hard and sweating" is either completely diluted or lost. And similarly, Academic V (Law) said "my sense of 'what's the value of doing a degree?' might not be quite the same as my answer to what we mean by a transformative experience".

Transformation is too big, it's too grand a word. ... that's critical skills, not transformation ... that's learning, it's not transformation. (Academic N, Sociology)

A transformation economy

Noting that research findings evidence and critique a growing and confused discourse related to transformation with some links to an already marketised 'student experience' discourse, it was with interest that I discovered a book by Pine and Gilmore (1999) which overtly describes an economic model for businesses definitively linking the two discourses. They define an "experience economy" as a progression beyond the "service economy" (p.189) where businesses "experientialize" their goods to realise higher economic value, noting that in the "educational realm", active participation is required from customers (students), where they "personally affect the performance or event that yields the experience" (p.30). This maps very neatly onto the homogenised and marketable 'student experience' outlined at the start of the paper.

New to the research table however, and supported by research findings above, the authors also describe a "pinnacle" economy beyond the experience economy, the "transformation economy". Pine and Gilmore (1999) believe that where repeated experiences risk homogeneity, transformation offers individualised experiences for each customer where the customer becomes the product, and each product is a "distinct economic offering" (p.197).

Combined with Sabri's (2011) accusations of a homogenised student experience (p.657), this adds gravitas to observations in this research of growth in use of the term "transformation" associated with a marketised HE environment. It also validates Academic N's (Sociology) discomfort with the term, who noted that institutions have "made explicit those narratives ... so that they [students] will stand out at interview" and returns the discussion to interpretations introduced earlier. This presents a distinct message around tensions in use value as part of the concept of transformation.

Conclusion

Combining evidence above with the criticism of transformation as a "floating signifier" (Illeris, 2014a, p.15), caution is therefore urged in using the term 'transformation'. Its usage introduces an inherent danger that attention will be deflected away from considering more carefully the key elements of undergraduate education we would wish to see. Rather, in moving forwards, it is important as educators and policymakers in HE to have a full awareness of competing ideologies which might lie behind its definition and use. In recognising this we should strive to be more explicit about the purpose and value of HE and intended graduate futures using a common, less value-laden language.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to academics interviewed for giving their time and views so generously. Heartfelt thanks to my doctoral supervisor, Kathryn Ecclestone for her continued guidance, support and academic critique, and to external examiners Kelly Coate and Holly Smith for their constructive feedback and encouragement.

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