Improving pre-entry access to university: Towards a model of transformational alignment

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Abstract

This article presents empirical research exploring adult returner students' approaches to learning via qualitative analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews. Interviewees' comments illuminate their approaches to study, their conceptualisation of information literacy, and their experiences as learners. We interpret the data through two theoretical lenses (transformational learning and constructivism). We propose a model of course re-design aimed at improving the practice of access by foregrounding within the redesign process the notion of personal transformation afforded by access courses.

Introduction

Courses offering access to higher education constitute a significant intersection between two major forms of Lifelong Learning, given that they are part of the adult learner's transition from previous forms of formal and informal learning (e.g. school learning, workplace training and learning) to a more formalised and academic learning situation, and in turn offer the possibility of further transition into full-time undergraduate study. As such, students on access courses are an interesting group to research, because they are positioned at the meeting point of a number of powerful learning environments, each with its own tradition, ethos, theory and practice of learning. The present paper seeks to illuminate the interaction of educational forces in the learning journeys of one such group of students.

The Pre-Entry course in Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Strathclyde offers potential adult returners the opportunity to study part-time a variety of arts and social sciences subjects as a prelude to possibly re-entering full time education as an undergraduate student. As such, like many equivalent access

courses in other institutions, it allows students to sample higher education and if they wish, to use the access course as a vehicle for entering a full-time degree course, either at Strathclyde or at other universities. In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, the course provides a) a form of preparation for the first year experience as it would be understood in the relevant Higher Education literature, and b) a space for transformational personal development as it would be understood within the Adult Education literature. These aspects may be said to overlap in varying degrees, depending on the perceptions and needs of the students, staff and the course designers.

The course is open to adult returner applicants, a group who are defined as having been away from full-time formal education for a period of at least three years (which means that this group of students are typically at least 21 years old, in effect the group formerly referred to in the UK as 'mature students'). In practice, a range of individuals of different ages and from varied backgrounds apply to this course:

- adults who are either unemployed and who perceive a degree as a route into a career
- individuals who are already in occupations but who would like to obtain a degree as a vehicle for career change.
- retired individuals who are fulfilling a long-harboured ambition to undertake academic study that circumstances had denied them earlier in their lives.

Equally, having sampled the higher education experience, pre-entry course students are free not to proceed to undergraduate study. As a part-time course taught by evening study, it is particularly attractive to individuals in full-time work who wish to explore university-level study without committing themselves to a full-time access course, with all the implications of sacrifice and financial hardship that the latter might entail.

Like the first year of the undergraduate degree to which the Pre-entry course provides access, it involves the study of three academic subjects. These are taught in a series of three modules of seven teaching weeks' duration, interspersed with generic sessions on study skills, applying through the Universities and Colleges Admissions System (UCAS) for a full-time place at University as an undergraduate, and so on, meaning that the three subjects are covered in succession (unlike the undergraduate degree proper, where the three subjects

are covered concurrently). The course therefore strikes a compromise in that the breadth of subjects studied in the first year of the degree is replicated, but in a less demanding timetable allowing exclusive concentration on one academic subject at a time, as befits a course which is preparing individuals who have not been engaged in full-time study for some time for the subsequent more intensive undergraduate first year. The range of modules on offer draws upon the range of subjects taught within the BA (Arts and Social Sciences) curriculum and in many cases involves the same teaching staff as the students will encounter if they proceed forward to first year full-time undergraduate study.

A number of questions about the experiences of learners on such a course naturally arise from an adult learning perspective. What sort of Lifelong Learning journey are the adult returners embarked upon and how does the University curriculum support them at the pre-entry/first year stages? Are access courses such as the Pre-entry course better characterised as providing Adult Learning in the broad sense alluded to in the lifelong learning literature, or as simply recruiting adult returners to standard (and somewhat entrenched) pre-existing academic practices? Our interviews with the participants were designed to shed light on these themes, but before summarising the results from the study, we will explore the relevant background literature in a little more depth.

Theoretical background

The broad field of adult education encompasses a wide range of learning situations including informal learning, workplace learning and lifelong learning within communities. The adult learning literature is not only broad in terms of its coverage of a wide range of learning situations, but is also broad in terms of the range of concerns addressed within it: not only is the learning of academic subject content examined, but also altogether wider issues such as self-direction, affective issues, transformation of conceptual structures, and personal development (Tennant, 2006; Schuller and Watson, 2009).

Issues surrounding adult return to full-time study have received a great deal of attention in recent years (e.g. King, 2004; O'Donnell and Tobell, 2007; Reay, Ball and David, 2002; Richardson, 1994; Tennant, 2006). A number of such issues merit detailed study in connection with adult returners. At the broadest level of discussion are concerns about why these individuals decide to participate in education, what factors encourage success and what factors encourage drop-out (e.g. Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). More specific issues concern, for example, learner identity (e.g. O'Donnell and Tobell, 2007; Brine and Waller, 2004),

affective issues (e.g. George, Cowan, Hewitt and Cannell, 2004), and learning skills and strategies (e.g. Richardson, 1994). However, the extent to which access courses provide adult learning in the broad sense as opposed to more narrow preparation for the undergraduate first year experience, and the learners' perspectives on this issue, are at best only partially addressed by these previous studies.

The present paper focusses on the experiences of a group of adult returners to full-time study, and we contrast two distinct perspectives on the issue of access course students. The first is a broader adult education perspective emphasising personal development (involving two aspects – reflections on how the learner's identity is constructed historically and socially, and reassessment by the learner of his/her personal situation and options). The second is a more narrowly-focussed, constructivist, domain content (substantive knowledge of a discipline) and skill learning perspective (i.e. concerning the acquisition of skills such as study skills, life skills and employability skills as distinct from the implications of empowerment associated with personal development). These two perspectives draw upon two distinct bodies of research literature: the adult education literature (specifically, Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformational learning) in the former case, and the more narrowly focussed literature on theories of learning within higher education in the latter. These two bodies of literature share some common concerns and complement each other in significant ways, but also differ somewhat in emphasis. Consequently they offer a useful way of conceptualizing and examining the student experience of the pre-entry course; a brief review of these will allow us to explore tensions within the literature and examine its implications for adult return to university.

Adult learning theoretical framework

An adult learning-based theoretical framework that has generated a good deal of interest is Mezirow's (2000) notion of Transformational Learning. Mezirow poses the question: to what extent do students transform their own thinking patterns (the values, beliefs and assumptions, which constitute a lens through which "personal experience is mediated and made sense of": Merriam, 2004, p.62) as a function of participation in learning? The assumption is that when individuals find they can no longer use their existing values and beliefs to make sense of an experience, transformational learning can occur allowing the development of a new, more advanced perspective (Mezirow, 2000). Such transformations are argued to be triggered by a 'disorienting dilemma' which prompts a process of reflection on the adequacy of one's meaning structures.

The theory first emerged within a wider adult education context, but it could also be usefully applied to the more specific issue of adult return to full-time study via access courses, by conceptualising adult return in empowerment terms. The idea of learning as transformation in perspective entails a number of key assumptions:

- adult learners are distinct from school leaver undergraduates in having a greater amount of life experience to draw upon, and greater autonomy and less dependence on teachers.

- learners must learn to reflect on their own learning experiences and develop a greater capacity for insight and self-regulation.

- individual reflection is enhanced by collaboration with others and can develop into critical, discursive engagement with the objects of study and learning.

The fundamental pedagogical implication of all this is that the basic teaching ethos should become that of 'facilitation' and this is strongly associated with advocacy of 'student centredness' with an emphasis on 'designing for learning' as opposed to 'covering the content'.

Undergraduate learning theoretical framework

There is a considerable body of literature focussing specifically on learning by undergraduate students (e.g. Barnett and Coates, 2005; Biggs, 2007; Entwistle, 2007; Entwistle and Tomlinson, 2007). The consensus view emerging from that literature is referred to as *constructivism*, which essentially is the idea that students construct knowledge under the guidance of tutors, and the more actively engaged students are with the learning task, the better they will learn. According to constructivism, students have to engage in complex processes of seeking meaning and deep understanding through practical activity, reflection and judgement; the lecturer's task is one of designing student activities that promote this deep processing. Learning is characterised as involving reflection, self-regulation, metacognition and creativity, all of which emphasise the active nature of student learning processes. This activity would require students to select, analyse and apply knowledge to complex problems, which in turn would extend activity beyond the classroom to the relevant background literature, both printed and online, requiring good skills in finding, evaluating and using information sources. This has many echoes of the pedagogy outlined above in terms of adult learning practice.

From the constructivist perspective, assessment is seen less as a means of judging students and more as a means of motivating students and providing feedback to improve future performance. Biggs (2007) articulated the notion of *constructive alignment* as defining a good system of university teaching. In constructive alignment, the focus is on promoting student activity by specifying learning objectives through verbs (i.e. specifying actions and activities rather than domain facts to be acquired), selecting teaching methods and student activities that will elicit relevant activity from students, and using assessment strategies which will evaluate the students' accomplishment of the stated objectives and motivate in them efforts to improve. The emphasis is on promoting relevant student activity rather than transmitting information or covering content.

Constructivism can be criticised from an adult learning perspective on several grounds (Zukas and Malcolm, 2007): constructivism tends to ignore individual differences among students in terms of diversity, gender, ethnicity, selfhood and so on; it treats learners as anonymous and interprets pedagogy as sets of techniques applied by teachers to elicit particular responses in learners; it incorporates demands for employability skill sets but more in response to employer demands than student needs and potential. In short, the research literature on constructivism in undergraduate student learning could be argued to conceptualise learning as the acquisition of a skill set rather than as a matter of individual personal development. The adult education literature constitutes an altogether wider vision of higher education's role within society, and places more emphasis on individual ethical and existential growth: that is, transformation, arguably in the Mezirow sense.

Consequently there is a need to reconcile two somewhat different bodies of pedagogical knowledge, which can for convenience be labelled as theories about *Adult Learning/Adult Learners*, and theories about *University Study/Teaching Disciplines*. Johnston (2010) argues that University lecturers could gain some useful insights from studying the precepts of Adult Education: for example, in course design, teaching practice, and management of the first year experience. We explore these themes further below.

Biggs' (2007) notion of constructive (or curriculum) alignment is an interesting one to apply to access courses. The extent to which access courses are consciously designed with constructivist or alternatively lifelong learning precepts in mind is unclear. In fact, it may be that access course design is more aligned to the practices currently employed in the first year of undergraduate study at

university rather than more encompassing notions of personal development. But it is reasonable to ask: how do the access students themselves perceive their course in relation to these issues?

The research that we undertook attempted to address elements relating to both the constructivist skill acquisition perspective (namely the students' approaches to learning, i.e. their study skills, and their information literacy skills) and a more encompassing aspect of learning in terms of their reflections on the experience of studying on their access course.

The study's findings

The findings of our study have been presented elsewhere (Anderson, Johnston and McDonald, 2011; Anderson, McDonald and Johnston, 2011). In the present article, we summarise the key findings and integrate these into a more comprehensive overview. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on our behalf by three postgraduate students who were experienced in interviewing. 18 volunteer individuals (9 male, 9 female, of varied ages, with all participants older than 21 years of age with a maximum age of 70 for one participant) were interviewed on the three broad topics (approaches to learning, information literacy, and their experience of the pre-entry course as a whole). These three broad topics were selected because arguably they tap directly into major facets of the learning experience: the learners' conceptualisation of the learning task (what is to be learned and how it is to be learned), the learners' conception of information (what is to be accessed, how it is to be accessed, and how obtained material is to be selected among) and finally reflections on the experience of undertaking the course. Their responses were transcribed in full, and subsequently qualitatively analysed using the constant comparative method to identify the underlying themes emerging across the group as a whole.

In respect of study skills, participants report using fairly rudimentary study techniques, typically involving multiple readings of textbooks. E.g. to quote one student,

> 'I don't know if what I am doing is right, I just read the information, I write it down, I read it again, I write it down. I just try and write it down and read it as much as possible so that hopefully some of it sticks'.

More rarely, such reading is combined with integration of other materials. More rarely still a variety of learning strategies is selected among, with reference to the demands that particular academic disciplines place on learning. For example:

> 'Well Sociology was just re-writing notes that I had taken in class about the relevant material and reading books. In Spanish I put my words on cards and labelled everything in my house and put signs up on my wall. For Law again I just wrote out quotations and did mind maps for the little Acts and quotes. I've been in education for some time so I've picked up a few things along the way'

These techniques appear to be used very much in the service of a memorisation approach to learning. The students drew a strong distinction between material that was seen as more reliable and other material that was seen as less reliable, or as they put it, between 'facts' and 'conjecture'. One side effect of this was a reluctance to engage in peer interaction, because fellow students' knowledge was perceived as less valuable than tutors' and students failed to see the point of hearing about their fellow students' views.

The sharp distinction between 'facts' and 'conjecture' also influenced these students' information using processes. The interview data suggest that these respondents have a strong sense of reliance on the authority of staff and published texts. This leads to students cautiously 'sticking to the rules' about what is legitimate information activity, and these rules in turn are inferred from what staff said about information searching. Interviewees' responses suggested that they had a developing sense of how to form judgements about subject-related sources of information for study purposes. This tended to be somewhat rudimentary, relying substantially on consensus across sources and the notion of 'authority'. For example:

> 'Well the internet I was a bit wary about because obviously on the different websites and things if its published in a book then you're a bit more confident thinking that this is actually kind of true information, whereas when I was looking at different websites, I mean there were some that were just wacky and I was just like I'm just not even going to let that sink into my brain in case I start talking about it'

The interview data also provide some evidence of transformation in learners' perceptions of themselves as a function of having undertaken access course study. For example, interviewees reported becoming more analytical in their day to day thinking, and of coming to see the learning process, and not just the end product, as important for them; such changes in perspective fit very well with Mezirow's notion of transformation. To quote one interviewee:

> 'It has really changed me though in the way I think about uni it was more the idea of doing, getting a degree but now its more I actually can learn something and I can I don't know do more with the whole uni experience I think that it has changed me that way, it's given me more commitment and you know I'm more focused and I'm more disciplined in a way because you only had seven weeks to get something down and you had such a short time span to learn so much things so in a way you had to discipline yourself if you wanted it….. I think it's definitely been beneficial and it's changed me a bit'.

The interviews also reveal that the students had held specific presuppositions regarding study in higher education, which were contradicted by the actual experience, in that the access course provided a more diverse range of teaching and learning experiences than the anticipated lectures, and in not involving sarcasm toward or belittling of students during teaching sessions:

> 'Well before I was, before I was coming here I was rather apprehensive just about whether or not this was a good thing or a bad thing, but you forget how open people can be especially those who are teaching to those who are wanting to learn. There's a sort of informal, unwritten rule that you're not going to be made fun of because you're learning, we all want to learn...'

This individual appears in the above quote to be harking back to negative experiences from the school years (and overcoming that negativity); Belzer (2004) noted similar phenomena.

Discussion

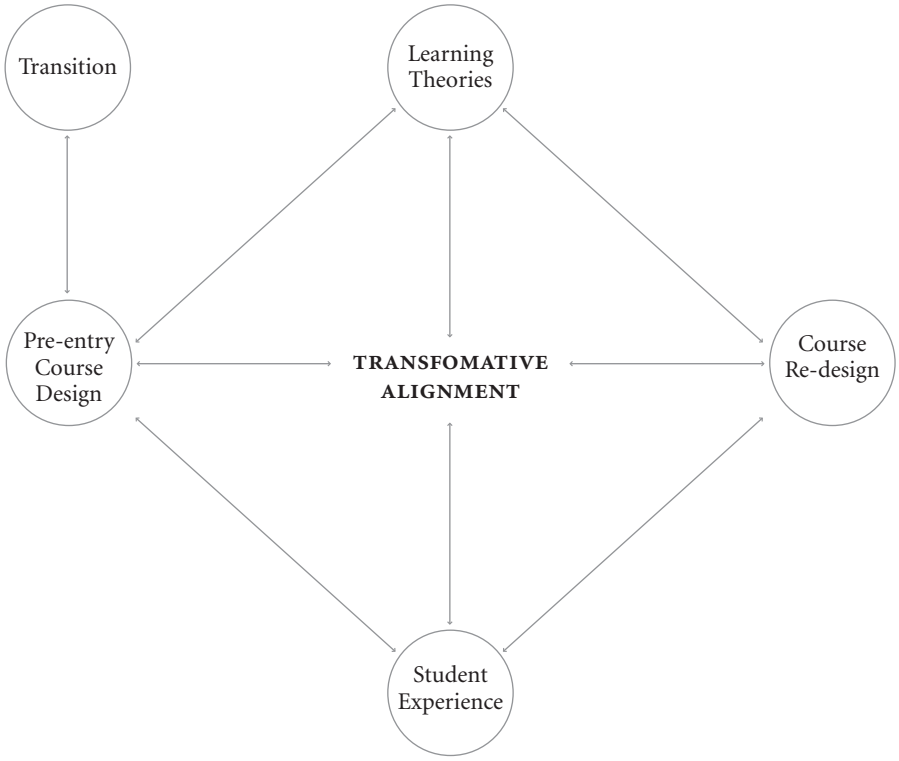
The overall picture of the access course student at the end of their access course that emerges from this sample of interviews is one where typically the individual has fairly rudimentary study skills and information literacy skills, allied to a realist epistemology in which there are right and wrong answers to academic questions. They see it as their task to learn the 'right' answers rather than opinions or conjecture and therefore focus on learning from textbooks on the grounds that their contents have been vetted and are more dependable. These students expect to encounter mainly lecturing-based teaching and learning experiences. This sample of access students typically report feeling academically underconfident and have anxieties about looking foolish before their peers during the course of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, these interviewees report having been transformed in significant ways by the experience of having taken the access course. How does this overall picture relate to this paper's major themes?

We would argue that there should be two lessons emerging from the theory we have reviewed and the data that we have gathered: firstly, there is a need to improve practice at the pre-first year undergraduate level; secondly, pre-entry access courses constitute an opportunity to provide a focussed period for personal reflection and development for the students, and a major question for future research on practice concerns how to best facilitate such processes of transformation.

Pre-entry access courses are the practical means of implementing access policy to increase the numbers of 'mature' students entering university. They are distinctive academic entities oriented to the first year of study, but they also display powerful transition issues of identity change, affective problems and lack of study skills on the part of returnees. To an extent they have been effective, although as a number of studies have shown, it is not an easy transition and significant numbers do not succeed (Karkalas and Mackenzie, 1996; MacDonald, Karkalas and Mackenzie, 1996; Reay et al., 2002). We argue that what has been missing is a model of the key elements of transition – academic, experiential and pedagogic – which will allow course designers and lecturers to refine practice and enhance the student learning experience. (see fig. 1). In the absence of such a model, academic practice to improve pre-entry courses is likely to be reactive and piecemeal.

In this model we have blended Biggs' concept of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2007) and Mezirow's concept of transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000) in order to make new sense of what may be going on in pre-entry courses, and thereby providing a new set of conceptual tools for course redesign and improved practice. We have provisionally called this idea "transformational alignment" as a shorthand means of conveying a complex scenario of individual development and the professional act of course design to support that development: see figure 1 overleaf.

Figure 1: The model of transformative alignment



At the centre of the model is the concept of transformational alignment, by which we mean that course design (e.g. the selection of objectives and the design of activities as outlined by Biggs, 2007) should be consistent with and facilitative of personal transformation of perspective in Mezirow's (2000) sense. The dimension of 'transition' identified in the model comprises several strands: a) the course design and teaching staff's intuitive sense of personal change experienced by learners in moving between educational levels; b) the formal acknowledgement of transition as a factor to be taken into account by course designers and teachers; and c) the reflection of both a) and b) within the academic literature, particularly in the sense expressed by Mezirow. Initial pre-entry course design (left hand side of the model) is informed by both research literature on transition and on learning theories; these justify the selection of pedagogies, and in turn the initial course design influences the quality of the student experience. Of course, the student experience is also in part influenced by other factors not represented in the model (for simplicity), such as previous experiences

in other formal and informal learning contexts, which can provide a 'filter' for interpreting the access course experience.

We argue that the initial pre-entry course design, learning theories, and information regarding the students' experiences should all feed into a process of transformational alignment for redesign of the course in such a way as to encourage and facilitate reflection and transformation. We see this as an iterative process, with repeated fine-tuning of the course in successive academic cycles. A key aspect of a re-design process would be the involvement of lecturers from the mainstream of first year teaching to ensure that pre-entry students are well prepared and supported. This would require lecturers to expand their appreciation of students' entry level assumptions and to develop reflective exercises as part of pre-entry teaching and feedback.

Consequently, we argue that a necessary additional aspect is the acknowledgement of this potential for personal transformation on the part of returnees. This would require anticipation of the kind of difficulties experienced, but more significantly, attention to such learning issues as: engaging more effective patterns of learning as described in the literature (Vermunt, 2007); and making explicit the nature of epistemological growth and its value to gaining knowledge and understanding. Thus we propose a concept of transformational alignment which incorporates an enhanced sense of the developmental aspect of transition as a driving force in pre-entry practice.

In conclusion, we argue that access to university by adult returner students could be considerably improved by the adoption by universities of an adult learning, transformational perspective. Doing so would mean that pre-entry access courses would not merely enhance the students' capacity for learning the traditional study skills entailed in the first year experience, but also help transform their thinking and conceptualisation of learning.

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