

The transformative effect of a foundation year: 'I'm a totally changed person'

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Developing academic skills and preparing students for university-level study are only two important outcomes of a foundation year programme. Drawing on the work of Mezirow, this paper will, with a focus on five students, consider the transformative element of adult learning through transforming previous assumptions and beliefs. The qualitative research was based on a university in south west England and consisted of several interviews over a four-year longitudinal research project, tracking the experiences of five foundation year students, assessing how well it prepared them for university-level study. This article will consider the transformative nature of the foundation year, highlighting specific changes in students' self-belief, agency, power and confidence. Drawing on the voices of the participants, the findings revealed that there are two main conditions which support transformation: firstly, having a sense of belonging through finding supportive social networks, and secondly, developing confidence in their educational ability. Additionally, the ways in which universities can get involved are explored, including ways in which lecturing teams can support these conditions for transformation and assist with any obstacles students may face during their foundation year. These insights may be useful in the design or development of other Foundation Year programmes, or in the wider context of supporting widening participation students with transformation.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to reflect on the transformative nature of a foundation year programme on a student's self-belief, agency and self-confidence. This paper will draw upon Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1991), and data from a longitudinal research study of foundation year students' experiences, to consider how foundation year students transform through their learning experiences and the conditions that enable transformation to flourish.

Although this article is based on a small-scale study of foundation year students in the United Kingdom (UK), the findings may be useful to those teaching students on other widening participation programmes. Widening participation programmes in the UK aim to address inequalities and barriers to HE for under-represented groups such as care leavers, mature students, disabled students, students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those from some ethnic groups (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). Opportunities for access and success can be

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increased by removing barriers to education such as raising aspirations and offering support to students throughout their studies (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). Foundation year programmes give widening participation students an opportunity to access HE and prepare them for university-level study (Sanders and Daly, 2013).

The purpose and benefits of a foundation year and why it supports transformation

A foundation year is part of an integrated four-year degree programme (OfS, 2019) and acts as a stepping-stone into university-level study, enabling students to experience a university-level course in their area of interest (Biggs, 2023). It prepares students, often from a widening participation background, for university study (Baker and Heron, 2023) and develops skills and attributes to enable students to be successful in their chosen degree (Feather et al., 2023). Examples include skills such as academic writing, attributes such as confidence and self-belief, and a distinctive HE habitus (Webber, 2023b).

In the UK, a foundation year is designed for students who have not achieved sufficient UCAS points (entry tariff used to allocate points to post-16 qualifications for UK Universities), or do not meet the course entry requirements (OfS, 2019). Mature students, often returning to study without UCAS points, can also gain entry through having prior industry-related experience (Webber, 2023a). There are many benefits of a foundation year, including developing academic knowledge, skills and values (Wood and Lithauer, 2006), developing the ability to participate in seminar discussions (Feather et al., 2023), identity change (Webber, 2023a), and performing better in their degree studies compared to their counterparts (Feather et al., 2023; Wood and Lithauer, 2006).

My previous research has shown that a foundation year introduces students to university-level study and prepares them for year 1. Through a foundation year, students can construct a positive academic identity, boost their confidence in their own abilities, and reshape how they view themselves (Webber, 2023b). Through a foundation year, students can develop social capital through opportunities for group work, peer collaborations and being part of the academic community. Cultural capital can be enhanced through activities to develop academic writing skills and knowledge of HE processes. This fosters their academic identity of self-belief, self-achievement, self-confidence and self-awareness (Webber, 2023b).

All these aspects act as a catalyst for transformation for foundation year students. However, there is a lack of research in this area. Previous research often focuses on engagement and attainment (Dougherty, 2022), promoting academic skills and knowledge (Wood and Lithauer, 2006) and developing confidence (Feather et al., 2023) in their university studies.

Transformation Theory

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning arose through his study of women learners returning to college on re-entry programmes (Mezirow, 1975). Transformation theory (Mezirow, 1991) is described as a re-examination of childhood beliefs, values and assumptions considering new knowledge and experiences. Perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991) often comes after a disorientating dilemma: this can be a major life-changing event or something that contradicts previous assumptions or beliefs.

Mezirow (1991) argues that not all learning is transformative, as new learning can be added to old without rethinking or challenging our assumptions, values or beliefs. However, through critical reflection, our attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and emotional reactions can change our meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) maintains that meaning perspectives are socially constructed, are based on our past experiences and include the taken-for-granted assumptions that build our frame of reference. Hence, our sense of self and our values are rooted in the frames of reference which help to shape our identity (Mälkki, 2010).

This is relevant to foundation year students as the content of a foundation year, and its interactive discussion-based activities (Webber, 2023b) or small group work pedagogy or seminars (Feather et al., 2023), can shake a student's taken-for-granted assumptions resulting in change which can be emotionally intense (Mezirow, 2000). Changes to a student's assumptions, values and beliefs can affect others, such as family members, work colleagues and friends, which challenges claims that Mezirow's theory of transformation is inward looking (Webber, 2015).

Mezirow's theory of transformation has been analysed by researchers within the field of HE, debating alternative aspects which can influence transformative learning. For example, Mezirow portrays the process of transformation as a rational process but other authors regard this as an emotional and intuitive process (Boyd and Meyers, 1988). This is important to note as feelings and emotions are intrinsic characteristics of learning. Taylor (2000) mentions that emotion in critical reflection can bring feelings of courage, self-trust and inner strength to transformation. Furthermore, when discussing transformative learning, there is a focus on the individual, but friendships can also promote transformative learning (Taylor and Cranton, 2015). Southern (2007) also discusses the importance of students and lecturers having trusting relationships that are open, enabling a shift in thinking through considering and questioning each other's perspectives.

Transformation through higher education

A transformative effect is most observable in students who feel self-doubt in relation to their perceived academic ability. However, through HE, students feel an increase of knowledge, confidence and self-worth which they described as 'transformative' (James and Wintrup, 2011). Glisczinski (2007) saw a third of their sample of college students appear to experience transformation. As judged through Mezirow's phases of perspective transformation, they displayed 'disorientating dilemmas, critical reflection, rational dialogue and taking better informed action' (Glisczinski, 2007:322).

Transformation is not only confined to younger students. Transformation is possible for older students too (Lightfoot and Brady, 2005). When looking at a sample of older women returning to education (Brown and Brown, 2014), researchers saw transformation educationally, socially and psychologically while participants completed their doctorates. One participant reported feeling transformation when they got their PhD through feeling validated, and many had transformation reinforced by reports from family, friends, etc., seeing them change (Brown and Brown, 2014).

The process of transformation for mature students is not easy. As Willans and Seary (2011: 136) state, 're-engagement with formal study can be physically, cognitively and emotionally challenging as old identities clash with new and previous perceptions of self as learners are contested'. However, persisting through this can create personal transformation. This challenging process relates to Dirkx's research (Dirkx et al., 2006), through which transformative learning and experiences prompt a change in cognitive, emotional or spiritual ways of being. Thus, HE can provoke transformative learning, but this can be a particularly tough journey for mature students owing to the process reframing a lot of 'set-in-stone' beliefs and perceptions which can be demanding to change.

Establishing a learning environment that enables social relationships to be nurtured can initiate and support transformations (Willans and Seary, 2011). This was important for mature students in Willans and Seary's research but also for foundation year students who have self-doubt in their own academic abilities. Therefore, it is important to 'safely deconstruct long-held negative perceptions of self as learner that have hindered potential and allow for the conceptualisation of new perspectives about self' (Willans and Seary, 2011: 136). Building safe environments for critical reflection, and encouraging learners to actively challenge habits, is fundamental to transformative learning for mature students (Scheele, 2015).

Although there is research on transformation for mature students, there is a gap in specific research on foundation year students. Although written in 2000, Taylor's critical review of Mezirow's transformative theory recognised the need for further research in the role of emotions and relationships in fostering transformative learning. This research will touch upon these areas, specifically for foundation year students. Southern (2007) recognised transformative learning developed through trusting relationships and caring within a classroom; this research extends this to consider workplace transformation as well as educational transformation. The longitudinal nature of this research enables transformation to be considered over a length of time, giving fresh insights into developing confidence, self-belief and changing assumptions.

Methods

This paper analyses a foundation year programme at a university in the south west of England, using data from a small-scale longitudinal study, whereby five self-selected undergraduate students were documented across the span of the four years of their degree, starting from their foundation year (see Table 1). The findings in this paper draw on original research that addressed the following questions:

- What are the aims and motivations of students embarking on the four-year degree?
- What are the lived experiences of students over the duration of their four-year degree?
- How well does the foundation year prepare students for university-level study?

Name	Age on starting FY	Prior educational experiences	Motivation for entering HE
Diana	35	Professional child-care qualification	- a degree and graduate position - a better understanding of theory, greater early years knowledge - a good understanding of herself - to support her family
Flo	21	Achieved enough UCAS points for a 3-year degree but chose a foundation year as she did not feel mentally or emotionally ready for year 1	- a degree in education - graduate career options - experience in practice
Kate	35	Professional non-childcare qualification	- change of career plan - time to focus on herself - better family life
Stephanie	37	Professional child-care qualification	- extend her experience of early years - to progress her career
Tony	34	Professional non-childcare qualification	- a springboard into a Teacher Education degree - ambition to be a primary school teacher - experience in the sector

Table 1 – Participant Details

The approach taken to collect data was a qualitative, mosaic, longitudinal approach. This is very unusual in foundation year research. Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of the participants' social experiences (Spencer et al., 2014). A mosaic approach provides even more richness to data, by allowing researchers to piece small details of data together to form themes, patterns and 'an entire picture' (Rogers and Boyd, 2020).

At the first phase of the study, data was collected through mind-mapping interviews. The mind maps were a useful tool to help students to feel comfortable at the start of this project: giving them opportunities to mind-map their experiences around themes such as their personal aims when starting the foundation year, their motivations, their experiences to date, and turning points enabled them to independently reflect on these areas before the interviews started. This method was beneficial in giving participants time and space to focus on key themes, as well as enabling them to take the lead in the interview, discussing aspects of the mind maps that they wanted to share.

In the second phase, interviews were completed twice a year. During these interviews, participants were encouraged to share reflective journals and photo diaries to initiate discussions and track their experiences. Although each student was given a journal to reflect on their experiences during the foundation year, none of them participated in this form of

research, which was disappointing. However, the mind maps and longitudinal interviews gave sufficient rich and in-depth data.

Each interview was recorded, transcribed and analysed through a thematic framework. The mind map interviews were part of this process and written up in the form of transcripts to be analysed alongside the other interviews. This type of analysis aids in unpacking experiences, thoughts or behaviours within the data (Kiger and Varipo, 2020). The transcripts were coded manually by research interns, looking for frequency of themes. These were cross-checked and verified by twelve research interns over the course of the project. This enabled the researcher to step back from the analysis and reduce bias. The recurring themes included confidence, self-belief, a sense of agency and belonging, power, and, most notably, transformation.

Ethical approval was granted via the authors' university institution, participants gave informed consent, and their input was anonymous via the use of pseudonyms. The ethical protocol acknowledged that the researcher was a member of the foundation year teaching team and outlined the safeguards in place to ensure the student participants were not penalised or favoured. All participants were informed that participating in the research project or later withdrawal would have no influence on their academic studies. For example, participants were reassured that assessments were marked anonymously and their participation in the project would have no bearing on their grades. During interviews, participants had the right not to answer questions and to choose what to share from their student collected data (e.g. mind map). This, and the use of a mind map initially, helped to reduce the hierarchal relationship between the lecturer researcher and student participant.

Findings – Transformation

I'm a totally changed person. (Stephanie)

All the participants discussed transformations to their knowledge base but also their practice, their relationships, and their previously-held beliefs. These transformations were not '*epochal*' (sudden) but were '*accumulative*' over a period (see Mezirow, 2018:206). These were often 'a progressive sequence of insights resulting in changes in point of view and leading to a transformation in habit of mind' (Mezirow, 2018:94).

For both Diana and Stephanie, they experienced disorientating dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991) that added to their transformation.

Disorientating dilemmas – increasing agency and power

Diana was an Early Years practitioner and previously had not felt listened to by her colleagues or other professionals; she did not feel she had a legitimate voice. As her knowledge base increased, so did her voice and she felt, 'I have a bit of an informed opinion, more than I did at the beginning'. At times this shook her up a bit as she questioned previous beliefs and felt unsettled initially: 'I feel like my foundations are shaken a bit.'

After comments from other professionals that validated her right to speak (Tan and Moghaddam, 1999), she felt more valued in practice. These transformations were not always welcomed by all her colleagues:

I'm learning to understand and appreciate that the change in me is not necessarily something that makes other people feel comfortable as well.

Stephanie's disorientating dilemma (Mezirow, 1991) happened during her work-based learning placement as she experienced practices that were different from her beliefs. Through critical reflection, she recognised previous beliefs and biases (Mezirow, 1991) but also had new understandings of the situation and her power to bring about change. She used her growing ability to voice her beliefs to speak up, ask questions and challenge systems:

It's taught me the power we all have as students ... and the difference we can make.

This transformation was significant for Stephanie as she realised that she could make a change for others.

These feelings of new-found power and self-confidence measure a stark contrast in Stephanie's and Diana's journeys, whereby previous judgements in their lives prevented them from feeling power in themselves (Gan et al., 2018). Stephanie felt as a mature student she was judged a lot by her peers in her first year:

I truly believe I had a lot of ageism going on.

Diana felt that listening to other people's judgements held her back:

I regret listening to people that told me I couldn't and I shouldn't and I wouldn't.

However, through their journey they both felt freer to use their voice, gained faith in their knowledge and skills, and had their own genuine opinions and perspectives, which led them to be authentic and, through being authentic, to feel powerful (Gan et al., 2018). Thus, the transformations were not just down to one disorientating dilemma or experience but 'emerging from recurring and subjective confrontations with people, ideas and place' (Lipura, 2021:269).

My power is I bring a lot to the table and that's okay to say out loud (Stephanie)

My new life tells me that I have possibilities and potentials and you're never too old or too young to do anything. You're never too stupid. You're never too unqualified ... And I think, I feel a little bit more empowered this year. (Diana)

Transformations – reimagining themselves through self-belief

Transformation is not always an easy process as mature students re-enter education (Willans and Seary, 2011). Returning to study can be difficult and many of the students displayed low self-esteem and self-doubt when it came to starting their degrees. Griffiths et al. (2005) report a 'learning shock' in students returning to education and this can detail feelings of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety. Tony mentions the uncertainty he had with beginning the course – 'it's just going into the unknown' – and the fears he had around this:

I'm going to sound really stupid? Am I going to feel really stupid? Yes, it's just silly, little fears, things like that. Am I going to know where I'm going? Am I going to be able to keep this going? Am I going to enjoy it? Am I going to hate it?

Others in the programme mentioned that they felt like an imposter within higher education (see Chapman, 2017), which made them feel that they could not succeed:

My internal imposter syndrome, fear of failure, I just thought this whole year is a write off. (Diana)

However, all students started to gain more faith in themselves, which in turn changed their perceptions of themselves and their previous meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). Turner (2014) describes how self-belief can be formed by an ability being improved, having the capacity to achieve goals and having an environment that enables goal attainment. The foundation programme provided these elements to the students, which in turn enabled them to develop and reflect self-belief:

Before I used to think 'oh, I'd like to do that or I'd like to do that' but now, I think 'I could do that.' (Kate)

And I think that's what foundation year was for me, I've realised that I am capable of doing this. (Flo)

The foundation year changed them as people (Flo and Stephanie), friends noticed a change in them (Tony and Kate), their parenting changed (Diana, Kate and Stephanie), and they became stronger advocates for others (Stephanie, Diana). This led to life-changing transformations (Webber, 2015), as they recognised the value in being themselves and that they had something to offer others:

I'm all right, I bring something to the world. (Stephanie)

I think I have just learnt lots about myself and the world that I did not really fully understand before. And yeah, it has just given me a bit more belief in myself. (Kate)

Conditions that support transformation

Webber's previous research (2023b) indicated factors that contributed to foundation year students coping and flourishing in their studies during the Covid-19 UK national lockdown, when their learning moved online. We maintain that these factors are also important in aiding transformation. These factors included:

- Having a strong sense of learner identity as a university student
- The programme developed their study skills
- The importance of their relationship with the lecturer and accessing support
- The importance of collaborative peer relationships
- The importance of campus and feeling part of an academic community

We would like to elaborate on some of these factors here and consider the importance of belonging. The examples we will draw upon show conditions that support transformation,

including building a sense of belonging through social networks and support, and developing confidence in their educational ability.

Building a sense of belonging through social networks and support

Social networks are a fundamental element of having resilience in the continuation of a degree as well as constructing a sense of belonging in university-level education (Webber, 2023b). Friendships can offer emotional support as well as acting as a buffer for support in stressful situations, which encourages students to stick with their degree (Wilcox et al., 2005). Friendships can also support transformative learning (Taylor and Cranton, 2015). Kate mentioned the importance of the friendships she formed in the foundation year:

I met a couple of people in foundation, who are still with me now, and I definitely think it's had a really positive impact on my motivation to keep going.

However, a social network does not have just to entail support from friendships; O'Sullivan et al. (2019) state that relationships with tutors and administrative staff were fundamental to a growth in confidence in the foundation year. This growth could be due to tutors 'deconstructing and reconstructing' students' previous educational experiences to move away from negative thinking and negotiate the resources students need to succeed in higher education (Seal and Parkes, 2019:8). Some students expressed their freedom to speak to staff to seek help and support:

I had lots of members of staff who were really supportive. (Stephanie)

It really felt like anytime I was struggling I could come to you guys, more specifically when it was academic. (Flo)

Forming support networks not only offers benefits to students socially and mentally, but they form a sense of belonging to a community of learners (Shepperd et al., 2023). A sense of belonging can be attributed to learning environments owing to the emotional rollercoaster of self-doubt and uncertainty, which can turn into the thrill of learning and achievement (Christie et al., 2008). Helping students to connect to and feel attached and comfortable within the campus can also facilitate a sense of belonging which supports transformation (Webber, 2023b).

Developing confidence in their educational ability

As previously discussed, a foundation year offers many skills to students and prepares them for degree-level study (Sanders and Daly, 2013), with students such as Kate expressing the view that the year gave them a 'head start.' Owing to this preparation, the added year establishes the fundamentals for academic confidence (O'Sullivan 2019), with students like Diana mentioning that the skills that foundation provided made her more confident:

I probably wouldn't be so motivated and confident had I not had those skills given to me before.

And many students reported that they felt more rehearsed on certain skills than students who did not do a foundation year since they had those skills provided to them earlier:

Other second year students were sort of asking about 'oh well how do you reference this, and I can't remember how to do this', and I think I feel like that's a bit more ingrained in me. (Kate)

This confidence in their academic abilities had an impact on students' lives as this confidence provided certainty in their abilities, and certainty in themselves, which granted transformation. Previous research saw that developing academic confidence contributed to students' transformation and enabled them 'to shrug off previous experiences and identities and reshape how they viewed themselves' (Webber, 2023a:177). Having confidence in your academic ability allows for confidence within yourself which can alter a person's values and beliefs and thus welcome in transformation.

The way I look at it, education has been reinforced and confidence has really built up in it. (Tony)

For someone who started as you well know, started with zero confidence, I'm quite confident now. (Stephanie)

Limitations

Although this research shows the powerful effects of transformation through a foundation year, students can still struggle with imposter syndrome. So, whilst we encourage opportunities for students' transformation, how can we also support and challenge these niggling feelings of self-doubt? Further research could investigate the occurrence of imposter syndrome in some foundation year students and explore strategies to overcome this self-doubt.

It is important to be mindful that this study is based on a small sample of predominantly mature students. One student (Flo) mentioned that as a younger student, she may have changed anyway during that time; this calls into question whether transformation has a greater impact on mature students and if this is a different process for them. Mezirow's theory was based on mature women learners returning to study; further research could investigate if transformation has a bigger shift and a separate process for younger or mature foundation year students. Although this research was based on a longitudinal study revisiting the experiences of a group of foundation year students, which is a strength, a key limitation is the small group of five students. Larger cohort studies are now needed to investigate these findings further across a wider population.

Conclusion

A foundation year provides essential skills that make a large impact on students' performances through the length of their degree. These skills not only hold academic benefits but largely support the confidence of students. Confidence-building is crucial for students who did not feel assured in starting a degree for reasons like not achieving the course UCAS points or having been away from study for many years. Developing skills which foster confidence, and a sense of

support, gives students the opportunities for new goals and, most importantly, the self-belief and agency to strive for those.

It is important to recognise the position students are starting from without assumptions or bias. There may be anxieties (Griffiths et al., 2005), self-doubt, imposter syndrome (Chapman, 2017), as well as an excitement about embracing the new possibilities ahead. The lecturing team need to be aware that learning may be unsettling, as students consider new perspectives and ways of being that are at odds with their previous assumptions or realities. Supportive relationships with tutors and lecturers can help students navigate their way through disorientating dilemmas, and gradual changes to their meaning perspectives, as students interact with challenging course content. Creating a safe environment which utilises lecturer support and encourages social networks (Webber, 2023b) can create transformative learning and a developing sense of self-belief (Turner, 2014).

A teaching pedagogy which encourages debate, discussion and critical reflection enables new perspectives and positions to be considered (Scheele, 2015; Webber, 2023b). Developing confidence in students' academic ability generates self-belief and reinforces that they are capable and able, despite many not feeling this at the start of their degree.

Overall, a foundation year opens a world of possibilities to students including the opportunity for transformation, but this is contingent on the university's and faculty's cooperation in providing guidance and encouragement during the span of the student's foundation year.

Implications

The findings and implications from this paper may be useful for other foundation year programme leads and lecturers but is also useful in a wider context of supporting widening participation students in transformation. Foundation year and other widening participation programmes should:

- take special care to create a community around the students, with plentiful support from staff, supporting the socialisation and integration of students in an enabling and safe environment
- establish a teaching pedagogy that builds and develops students' academic confidence, opening possibilities and opportunities for self-growth and creating self-belief
- develop learning spaces that encourage critical reflection and opportunities for perspective transformation, thus creating in students new perceptions of themselves as capable and powerful learners

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