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“HOW HAVE YOU TRANSFORMED?” WHAT FEATURES OF PRACTICE DOCTORAL JOURNEYS BRING ABOUT TRANSFORMATION?

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INTRODUCTION

The fact that transformative learning lends itself to work-based and work-integrated learning at postgraduate levels continues to attract attention (Costley & Fulton, 2018). The concepts of individual and professional transformation, resulting from systematic and critical reflection on prior learning and experience, can be understood as lying at the heart of professional practice research. Hence, a process of learning-for-becoming accompanies any such candidate journey. Learners draw on such models as Wilcock's (1999) occupation-centred model of doing, being, becoming, and belonging, which conceptualises professional identity as situated, evolving, and deeply relational. Becoming denotes how people redefine their values and rethink their priorities to prepare for transformation into new roles and fresh ways of understanding themselves and their capacities as practitioners. Here, we contend that professional practice journeys learners in Capable New Zealand's 8-year-old Doctor of Professional Practice programme (DProfPrac) experience moments of transformation, realisation, and positive change. What happens, we contend, aligns with Mezirow's (1991) theoretical reflective-change-action process and creates learning possibilities beyond andragogy to foster supported and negotiated yet self-determined learning journeys for adult professionals (Taylor, 2007).

Candidates on the DProfPrac become aware of their changing practices—as practitioners and as researchers—through the reflective methods within the programme's heutagogical structure. What Mezirow (1991) termed “perspective transformation” is a desired outcome of the DProfPrac's signature facilitative, heutagogical mentoring. The programme's design suits experienced professionals drawing on their own practice journeys to generate new knowing for themselves and others (Lester & Costley, 2010) and, moreover, from workplaces where others may also benefit from their change-focussed learning (Costley, 2010). That the programme is transformative is echoed in personal communications with programme monitors: “Learners and recent graduates commented on the transformational nature of their learning and the high degree of relevance of the DPP study to their professional development and their work” (personal communication, 2024, quoted with permission). Two such learner practitioners power the evidence set used in this study, which asks: what affordances of mentored doctoral journeys bring about transformation; or, in short, what transforms?

CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

This study not only casts light on transformative ‘becoming’ in doctoral contexts; it also contributes to emergent methodologies. The study opens out two methods of enquiry. Firstly, our methodological innovation employs dialectic, conversation, and speaking as a form of reflection both in and on experiential learning. Secondly, this innovation, in turn, parallels writing as a method of enquiry (Richardson, 1990). We call this method dialectical autoethnography, mining evidence from authentic and contextualised conversations about practice. Hence, we

maintain, the evidence set at the heart of this paper is itself informed by theories of transformative learning with which the learners, as educators themselves, are fully familiar (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2009, 2012). This means a two-learner 'live' interview comprises this study's "evidence," otherwise known as 'data' (Denzin, 2013), implementing a small-scale empirical methodology. With Denzin's (2019) vision of practice research articulating utopian transformation in mind, we believe our identification of transformative traits in the learning process points to what Denzin, like ourselves, views as hope in a post-neoliberalist age where learning has become perfunctorily instrumental.

The affordances of holding the potential to transform and enabling moments of becoming are characteristic of postgraduate heutagogy in professional contexts. We can attribute these characteristics to professional doctoral heutagogy's strong emphasis on, firstly, self-determination as an aspect of transformation (Hase & Kenyon, 2013) and, secondly, the potential transformativity of such heutagogy (Blaschke & Hase, 2016; Mann et al., 2017). Within such enquiry-led educative contexts, professional research propels "the power to be transformative at the institutional, communal, interpersonal, and individual levels" (Ravitch, 2014). It also allows for and affords multiple lenses as part of the critical (re)envisioning of practice so that, for instance, insider perspectives can be supported or triangulated by real and imagined external views (Evered & Louis, 1981). A further purpose of this article is to open out heutagogy for professional practice as a potentially transformational method of collaborative research with the learner increasingly aware that they are the expert.

Procedurally, the paper both demonstrates (through data in action) and considers (through critical contextualisation of the responses) how a transformative heutagogy for practice doctorate leverages reflective practice (Rodgers, 2022), understanding of the role of reflexivity in researcher positioning (Taylor et al., 2023). Such work also requires unpacking loaded but powerful organisational and political language and acts of languaging, or being metacognitively aware how language is selected in action within a critically reflective process (Andrew, 2024b). It also means being open to the iterative and the emergent as key affordances of best practice in such professional learning contexts (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008; Leavy, 2011).

KOTAHITANGA

As best local practice, heutagogical mentoring in an Aotearoa / New Zealand context is an enactment of kotahitanga—solidity, togetherness and collective action (Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa, 2024). It reveals what is possible when mentors' and learners' visions and purposes converge in unity so that research becomes meaningful action that reshapes worldviews and transforms perspectives, and hence affords the professional learner chances to realise their capacity to act as a change agent (Simsek, 2012).

Heutagogical mentoring also enacts Freire's idea that "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (1970, p. 72). It is a subject the first author has discussed in detail in a study of how "mentoring" not "supervision" describes these educators' teaching and learning interventions: "'mentoring' is an authentic term for heutagogical strategies that occur during negotiated transdisciplinary professional practice research journeys and that have positive impacts on developing identities" (Andrew, 2024a, p. 23). Those impacts, we argue in the current study, can be encompassed by the terms "transformation" and "transformativity."

TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSFORMATIVITY

Transformation, a desired change outcome from learning, and transformativity, the inbuilt and scaffolded affordances of learning designed to lead to transformation, lie at the heart of the work of Jack Mezirow. Transformative learning theory, strongly grounded in constructivism, communicative action, and emancipatory critiques of learning (such as those of Freire and Habermas), famously appeared in 1978 as a ten-phase process

beginning, as professional practice does, with a Dewian disorienting dilemma (Dewey, 1944). This was a workplace puzzle, a curiosity to explore and sometimes an experience-based hunch, leading to what Mezirow (1991) called perspective transformation. By this time, Mezirow had identified a key component of the evolving theory, seeing transformation as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (1996, p. 162). This was a version of the theory ready for the “Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous” (VUCA) world (Barber, 1992).

Seen by Mezirow always as a process rather than an *a priori* prescription, transformative learning follows key stages. Refining or elaborating our meaning schemes (that is, our existing frames of reference) leads to learning new meaning schemes (best understood as new frames of reference). In turn, transforming meaning schemes (which at this stage can be seen as habits of mind) leads to a process of transforming meaning perspectives or points of view (Mezirow, 1999, p. 49).

The communicative aspect of Mezirow’s theory, rather than the instrumentalist aspects, powers what we regard here as transformativity. The communicative theme was most likely channelled via Habermas’s (1990) critical idea of public communicative action, a notion prefiguring the idea of practitioner researcher as activist, potentially transforming opportunity for themselves and their communities (Costley, 2010). Communicative action also involves the kinds of designs for learning Grocott (2022) upholds as unlearning old practices and methods while embracing fresh ones, (re)designing and (re)creating them in the process as part of a vision for perspective shifting and hence transformative change. Through the (re)creative humanisation and democratisation of the learning journey, communicative channels open out, and it is these channels that transform those who communicate and their communities, affording the emancipatory and hence agentive impetus of Habermas’s conceptualisation.

In 2009, responding to views that his theory was overly cognitive and not sufficiently agentive, Mezirow re-construed transformative learning as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (p. 22). This is his most finely wrought definition of transformative learning, and the closest conceptualisation to the one we draw upon in the study. Mezirow died (in 2014) before the VUCA world of supercomplexity yielded to the BANI—“Brittle, Anxious, Non-Linear and Incomprehensible” (Casico, 2020)—universe of wicked problems. These adjectives seem to describe both our post-truth current reality and Denzin’s (2019) post-neoliberalist epistemology. This is the world of today’s learners’ disorienting dilemmas and, moreover, wicked problems. Ours are times beyond those of what Barnett (2004) called “encountering strangeness ... wrestling with it and ... forming one’s own responses to it” (p. 257) to (en)counter an unknown future.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is methodologically a praxical Socratic dialogue between an academic mentor, or supervisor, and two learners at the submission stage of their thetic journeys. It can be called dialectical autoethnography. The methods of the creation and presentation of evidence are potentially Socratic in that the praxis of our presentation engages with *aporia* (doubt and ambiguity) and *ethics* (critical morality) as well as a regard for co-negotiated constructivist situated knowledge (Grondin, 2018). It is praxical in that it explores a research: practice nexus with reflectivity as a link.

As collaborators leveraging kotahitanga, we wanted to adopt and adapt a methodology that was dialogic, praxical and Socratic; emergent and generative while drawing solidly on empirical artefacts of our conversational journeys. We adopted Salo et al.’s (2024) Schönian position on learning in and for practice in that both solidarity and awareness of becoming are consolidated within such praxical interactions. Put more simply, the conversational aspect of this method of evidence captures reflection-in-action within a Mezirovian worldview, also affording a verbal and performative mode of expression suited to one conversant who is neurodivergent.

The bases of the study are ethics approved (Otago Polytechnic #HRE15-173, 2020 and #1038, 2024) and the learner/coauthor voices used with their approval.

The research addresses the question in our title and those described below. The work aims to explore facets of transformational change in theory as they play out in experienced reality. The evidence set, to draw on Denzin's epistemology (2013, 2019), is an edited transcription of a three-person interview. The interview took place in a real-life setting in real time and in an authentic context: the OPSITARA conference held in Christchurch, New Zealand in December 2024. The mentor interviewed the completing learners about the theme of experiencing and documenting transformation as they experienced it on their doctoral journeys, with an emphasis on reflectivity, reflexivity, autonomy, and agency. The discussion emerged in a conversation pivoting on three guiding questions suggested in advance by the participants as we planned the research event:

1. What has been the biggest transformative moment of your candidature?
2. What are some of the biggest challenges you faced when completing qualifications in a workplace setting, and how did you overcome them?
3. How does the self-directed learning structure of the DPP programme empower learners to take ownership of their research and practice?

The transcription was generated with Otter.ai and revised collaboratively. We now move to a version of the conversation edited from a raw transcript into what Denzin (2013, 2019) would consider an evidence set.

EVIDENCE SET

Martin: How have you transformed during your doctoral journey?

Steve: I've had to get over my own bullshit, is the short answer. But I've become a much more critically reflective practitioner, so I've managed to see biases that I could not see before, and I've mapped them. I've played with my inner voices around meaning-making, and I realised I was [making meaning]. I had a 'clever hero' persona. Originally, I really wanted to save the marginalised. And then, of course, I realised I was the marginalised. That's why I related. Then I realised I had a 'rebel' persona that wanted to burn the place to the ground and have change. And that's why I was constantly in change—a series of realisations, each with their own voice. I soothed those voices and have assisted them and used that energy to conform. I never thought I'd do such a thing, and it's outrageous to me, but here I am: submitted therefore conformed. The other really important thing for me is I came to understand the value of shutting up. Because when I got into the literature, I realised how little I knew and I thought I knew a whole lot. So those are pretty big realisations and shifts for me.

Jeremy: I've arrived at the end, knowing I don't know a lot. I think that's probably where I've come to, and I think that's ultimately the most impactful part of the journey to impostership and that's probably something we relate to. Being 'in academia' and practitioners, we sometimes meet people in the context of feeling like, "How am I here? Why am I here?", and "What am I doing here?" And I think that's also part of the transformation. Needing to be comfortable when you speak, that you do have something valuable to say, but be open to the fact that there's people who know a lot more than you on this topic. And I think about this idea of 'criticality'; that's a word I wasn't comfortable with, but it's nonetheless an important one on the journey. We just need to be continually evaluating our own assumptions, biases, and position.

Martin: And the biggest challenges you faced and how you overcame them?

Jeremy: I'll start off with the biggest challenge. And I think this is a personal one—being asked to be resilient. And I know that's an overused word, but really this is this journey where you're going to be challenged and you just

have to keep going. And I know we're all in academia or practitioners; therefore, that's something we say, but that's been the biggest challenge to learn—something that I tell everybody else: to learn and to deal with that. I think the other challenge is having to be creative in the space, which is all around workplace learning and impact. So my instance was, "Well, how am I going to get funding for the project?" Because there's not a lot of money at the moment. It's got worse, actually, unfortunately, but you've got to frame what you're doing as valuable in applications. I think we've all got a story that's there, and just to look where funding can be sourced to carry you through. Challenge three is when you're working with senior academics and this is back to impostership. You've sometimes just got to trust your judgment that you've got a worthwhile story to share. I think that's important to put across, because if you're working with eminent professors, you can sometimes be, "Wow, am I going to be able to come up with a convincing argument?" I think that's also something, and that's you've got to trust that it's your story. Therefore, the challenge is to persist.

Steve: My big challenges? The fact that I'm kind of an insider, insider researcher, and it's sometimes as if I am looking at the phenomena of transformational learning and becoming within vocational education as a response to complexities. That's my area of interest, because I do believe this linear, scaffolded curriculum stuff is not a wonderful way to adapt to complexity, because things change, right? Another challenge is that I'm a very visual learner. I think we privilege writing ridiculously in the academy, and I have produced a doctorate with 61 diagrams and 130 pages in a practitioner thesis. It's unconventional, so it's challenging. I've created a visual on the front page, and if you don't get it off the visual on the front page, then, well, there we are. I identify as neurodivergent, so I have challenges around [that] and I officially meet the criteria for disability in that my work is limited by my ability to write relative to [my abilities to] speak and draw. So therefore, how do I leverage that for good, rather than it being a bad thing? I've been rebellious about the over-privileging of writing. I use my rage to create spaces for learners just like me. That's what I've been doing all my life—attempting to have inclusion.

Martin: How does the knowledge that this is self-directed learning empower learners?

Steve: The answer is: incredibly. I have had the agency to design what has worked for me, and have mentors who are flexible enough to go, "Okay, that's how you're doing it. Okay, well, I haven't seen that before, but okay, give us the argument," and I've had the luxury of working with the mentors who I know and trust enough to be able to make myself vulnerable. So with that vulnerability has come huge motivation. Lisa Grocott says that transformational learning is cognitive, but also embodied, social, and emotional, and if we're not doing all three of those latter things, we have privileged the cognitive big time, right? And vocational education works so well because it's embodied for me, but with the emotional bit, so a lot of my work ended up being around how to navigate the internal world that goes on as a transformational learner. So yeah, the challenge has been to not go down the cul-de-sacs of psychology too much, which is focused on what's wrong.

Jeremy: I suspect I wouldn't be alone in here that many of us come from a background of teaching or practice or education, where we're the experts or the control. That was my background in China, [and] coming back to New Zealand, I had to relearn the value of being able to give learner the agency and trust that the learner would be able to achieve something worthwhile. In our own domains, I can see how empowering self-directed learning can be as it gives the learner the ability to be able to sustain the interest to complete a project. Because if I didn't have the self-directed learning aspect of the project, I wouldn't have completed it here. It was just too difficult during COVID. There's just no way we could have done it. So that's something, I think is a takeaway to think about: how you can integrate more self-directed learning with your own learners.

DISCUSSION

The significance of the study lies in demonstrating the power of reflectivity as a multi-directional, reciprocity/ako-led strategy to understand adult learner transformation, enhance confidence in ongoing researcher autonomy,

and ultimately build future-focussed capability and agency. By means of this enquiry we (one mentor and two learners) explore self-directed learning, transformativity, and agency for learners, demonstrating how reflectivity and reflexivity enable learners to access fresh views of themselves as change agents and capable researchers. They may, in their professional lives, already be these things; the journey helps them understand and move beyond understanding into capability for agency. As such, we see transformation at individual and socio-professional levels, but we also ask what is it that leads to transformation in such programmes.

Through this enquiry, we also wonder how to build transformativity into our doctoral heutagogy as an enhanced understanding of one's capability for agency. These are some of the affordances of the doctoral agency we unpack from the conversation:

- Affording chances for sense-making by leveraging insights into becoming, belonging (such as to academic communities) and transforming (Andrew, 2024a);
- Collaborating in mentor-learner teams that embody kotahitanga so that out of solidarity come visions of capability and the potential for understanding one's own agency;
- Heeding chances to gain awareness of (un)conscious bias—criticality, positioning, understanding limitations (Mezirow, 2012)—and thinking through stale neoliberalised terms like “resilience” (Andrew, 2024b);
- Articulating opportunities to map out coming-to-know in life journeys as research paths (Grocott, 2022);
- Safely offering complete freedom for identity exploration, including a context where all learners, including neurodivergent and indigenous learners (for instance), leverage their distinctive ways of being and negotiate their ways of doing research;
- Situating learning for transformation in communities of being, belonging, being heard, or sites of shared practice (Wilcock, 1999);
- Allowing the self-directed openness to move from encountering disorienting dilemmas and their adjunct wicked problems to genuinely un-colonised ‘innovation’;
- Enabling inquiry from outside and inquiry from inside to allow alternative lenses to unpack and repack practice (Evered & Louis, 1981; Ravitsch, 2014), and
- Exploring not only ‘canonical’ territories but also ‘liminal’ places and allowing them to become apparent, even demarginalising them by recognising them as intrinsic to individual journeys.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR WORK-BASED LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The discussion at the heart of this study makes contributions to such aspects of work-based learning as how learners move towards agency through a transformative process of engaging with enquiry within a facilitated and mentored journey. The study, and its method, unveil what Ravitch (2014), in a context of describing praxis-led transformative enquiry, calls “voices yet unheard, knowledges yet unvalidated, ways of being yet unsupported” (p. 10). We hear imposters, rebels and not-so-clever heroes on the border of entry to the hallowed community of professional researchers; even realising that, to an extent, they had already belonged there. Becoming a researcher is not an act on trespass on to privileged ground, but an invitation to contribute reflected experience and knowing-in-action to transformative practice.

The study explored narratives learners completing a Doctor of Professional Practice degree, concluding that the process empowers learners with a future-focussed mindset and the capacity to be both a thought leader and a change maker within their communities. The two learner voices articulate heutagogical practice that triggers

transformation and both speak of the affordances of their mentoring experience as impacting capability and transformation, with self-direction enabling agency. We see also that conscious sharing of kotahitanga enables a learning journey powered by reflective practice and critical reflexivity. As such, the paper links the affordances of quality work-based learning delivery in doctoral education with both personal and work-based impacts.

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