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## AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF ADULT LEARNING

*The Australian Journal of Adult Learning* is an official publication of Adult Learning Australia (ALA). It is concerned with the theory, research and practice of adult and community education, and to promote critical thinking and research in this field. While the prime focus is on Australia, the practice of adult education and learning is an international field and Australia is connected to all parts of the globe, and therefore papers relating to other countries and contexts are welcome. Papers in the refereed section have been blind reviewed by at least two members from a pool of specialist referees from Australia and overseas.

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**From the Editor's desk**  
Tony Brown



Welcome to AJAL for 2015, the 55<sup>th</sup> year of publication.

This time last year I referred to Jack Mezirow in the Editorial of the first issue. This year I again write about Jack but this time to remember his contributions to adult education, for Jack Mezirow died in September 2014 aged 91.

I was very fortunate to meet Jack Mezirow when he visited Australia in 1995. During his time here he visited some indigenous adult education centres in the outback before giving the keynote address at the very first NSW Adult Learners Week Conference – *No Limits to Learning*. Following that he, along with Mechthild Hart and Jane Thompson,

participated in a three-day colloquium at UTS coordinated by Mike Newman and Griff Foley. Here was a very genuine, unassuming man eager to meet and listen to others, and talk about his ideas of adult education and learning.

Jack Mezirow was born in Fargo, North Dakota long before it was made (in)famous on film and TV. His path to adult education, like many others, began in his work in community development and then the Youth Conservation Commission in Minnesota developing youth programs. It was a similar route into the field taken by his predecessors Eduard Lindeman and Malcolm Knowles. It was Knowles, who was then Secretary of the national Adult Education Association, who encouraged him to work and study in the field. Mezirow took up his first academic position at the University of California and then joined Columbia University's Teachers College in 1968.

Later when talking about that time Mezirow said that the field had little intellectual foundations and no serious discourse. It was young in academic terms, with very few theories of how adult learning occurred, and it rested on the experience of its practitioners. But practitioners did share a set of 'practice injunctions' and most professors of adult education agreed that there were a set of core concepts upon which those active in the field cohered around.

It was his exposure to a program of women's re-entry programs in community colleges in the early 1970s that was the catalyst for the theory that he became most associated with. Edee, his wife, attended one of the programs and he wanted to find out what 'impeded or facilitated' the women's learning. He was enthused by what he observed, by the vitality of the meetings, the importance of what they were studying for understanding their identities and their position in the world. They were engaged in an education that wasn't just a weekly meeting, it was much more important. They were not going through the usual experience in college, here was something very different, they 'weren't chewing gum and looking at the ceiling'. 'It was a real eye-opener for me', he recalled years later.

In 1975 he produced a report *Education for Perspective Transformation: Women's Reentry Programs in Community Colleges*, and so began a lifetime of writing about transformative adult learning.

In 1978 his article “Perspective Transformation” in *Adult Education Quarterly* announced his theory to an international audience, and it was most fully elaborated first in *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: a guide to transformative and emancipatory learning* (1990), and then *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (1991). He continued writing books and articles on his evolving ideas up until 2009 when he co-authored with Edward Taylor *Transformative Learning in Practice*.

Mezirow was most interested in how adults make meaning and how their meaning perspectives are transformed. He introduced to the English speaking adult education world the ideas of the German philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas whose books did not become available in the USA until 1971 (*Knowledge and Human Interest*) and 1984 / 1987 (*Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 volumes). He was one of the first to introduce Habermas’ ideas of the division of knowledge into three domains – instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory, and from Habermas he took the idea of rational discourse and its ideal conditions. Where these conditions exist adult learners can critically reflect on their assumptions and open up the possibility of transforming their perspectives.



*Jack and Edee Mezirow*

Into the lexicon of adult education theory entered concepts such as transformative learning, frames of reference, habits of mind, and disorientating dilemmas.

He saw his work as having practical benefit to educators interested in transformative learning. He saw the educator’s role as being to help learners examine the assumptions that underlie their beliefs, feelings and actions; to assess the consequences of those assumptions; to identify and explore alternative sets of assumptions; and to test the validity of assumptions through participating in reflective dialogue.

In his work at Teachers College, Columbia University he pioneered a new method of Doctoral education called the Adult Education Guided Intensive Study (AEGIS) in 1982, a program that remains groundbreaking in the current efforts to rethink doctoral education.

By the 1990s he came to believe that much North American adult education had been taken over by a pre-occupation with instrumentalised human resource development, and had lost its commitment to social justice and to being close to the ground where movements operated. He famously challenged the 1991 Annual Conference of North American adult educators to take stock. Charging the field with ‘negligence regarding the social action focus inherent in the mission and tradition of adult education’, he wrote of its ‘faded visions’ and need for ‘fresh commitments’.

In more recent years his theory of transformative learning has been questioned and critiqued, including by Australian colleagues such as Michael Newman in the *Adult Education Quarterly* (AEQ). Yet it continues to be the subject of discussion, something that Mezirow would have welcomed as he considered it to be a theory in development, and an important reference point.

Along with Eduard Lindeman and Malcolm Knowles, Jack Mezirow was one of the three most prominent American adult educators of the 20th century. This is not to diminish the many other very important figures in the history of American adult education (Myles Horton, Donald Schon, David Kalb, Ivan Illich, Carl Rogers, Phyllis Cunningham, bell hooks, Stephen Brookfield, and Sharan Merriam to name a few). His ideas are enormously influential in adult education theory and among practitioners in North America and well beyond. His death last September followed shortly after Edee’s in July 2014. His passing perhaps coincides with the end of the dominance of a particular humanist-inspired and community oriented adult education that arose in the aftermath of the Second World War in the USA.

He once said that his core concern had been to help people learn to participate effectively in democratic decision-making, and in implementing democracy in educational terms. Today that need is as great as ever, as the sense of alienation and disengagement with politics is a feature of virtually all western democracies. But the need for democratic decision-making rests on more than simply casting a ballot every few years. Questioning assumptions, challenging unwanted controls, and fostering reflection and dialogue remain very important aspects of adult educators’ work.

In this issue **Michael Christie, Michael Carey, Ann Robertson** and **Peter Grainger** write about 'putting transformative learning theory into practice'. They report on three case studies from different places, different times and with different sets of learners in a women's return to study program, among Swedish engineering PhD students, and students at an Australian regional university. They conclude that Mezirow's core theory is still applicable in adult and higher education settings.

Similarly **Thomas Ryan** and **Sarah Griffiths** discuss transformational learning for adults with developmental disabilities. Drawing on a literature review of North American research, their paper's focus is on the powerful impact of self-advocacy in developing leadership capabilities and new self- concepts.

Also from North America, **Jennifer Ouellette-Schramm** reports on supporting critical thinking growth among developmentally diverse adult learners. In her small study of six learners she uses constructive-developmental theory to explore the epistemological development of the learners in a reading and writing group in a Minnesota university.

**Jane Bone** and **Susan Edwards'** paper reports on research on peer-assisted learning and e-learning in teacher education. They challenge the argument that the use of Web 2.0 technologies saves time and effort and is a preferred mode of learning. Making use of Deleuze and Guattari and their concept of the 'rhizome' they discuss calls for pedagogical innovation in teaching early childhood in a university.

Also looking at the use of online platforms for learning in higher education is **Jenny McDougall's** paper. Her focus though is not concerned with technical aspects but rather on the question of 'authenticity'. Her study is based on an online discussion forum taking place in a tertiary preparation program, where she concludes that elements of an authentic discussion can be achieved.

How might assessment be aligned to the pedagogy of developing adult lifelong learners is the question that **Ya-Hui Su** discusses. Writing from Taiwan she argues that neither traditional assessment nor competence based methods are adequate to meet the contemporary environment of change. Instead she proposes an existentialist assessment focusing on

developing learners' commitment as a means of connecting learners to their world.

The final paper in the refereed section takes a look back at a tertiary enabling program offered at the University of Newcastle in the mid 1970s. Research on tertiary enabling programs have been a feature of AJAL in recent years as higher education policy has encouraged universities to broaden their student intakes. In this paper **Josephine May** and **Rosalie Bunn** remind us that various Whitlam government policies were designed to open access to university study to more young Australians than before. One outcome was the University of Newcastle's Open Foundation program aimed at 'non-traditional students'. The paper explores three key themes that contributed to the programs longevity.

In the non-refereed section of this issue **Peter Kearns** contributes a very informative update on the Learning City concept. The Learning Cities idea emerged from the work of OECD on lifelong learning and was originally taken up in the West. Peter reports that today it is the development of Learning Cities in East Asia – especially in China, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan – that is dynamic. UNESCO's International Conference on Learning Cities in Beijing in late 2013 will be followed by a Second International Conference in Mexico City. The paper speculates on possible future development after Mexico, including the situation in Australia, which is seen as opening opportunities for innovative initiatives.

To complete the issue **Jonathan Tyner** reviews Ly Thi Tran's book *Teaching International Students in Vocational Education: New Pedagogical Approaches*.

Finally, a reminder that the final issue in 2015 will be devoted to the topic of *Public Pedagogies* and will be guest edited by Dr. Karen Charman and Professor Maureen Ryan. If you are interested in submitting a paper to this issue please visit <http://www.ajal.net.au/call-for-papers/> to read the Call for Papers. Proposals are due by 30 May.

Tony Brown

## Putting transformative learning theory into practice

Michael Christie  
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*This paper elaborates on a number of key criticisms of Mezirow's transformative learning theory as well as providing arguments that validate it. Our paper exemplifies how Mezirow's theory can help adult educators and prospective school teachers understand that social structures and belief systems can influence student learning, that learners make meaning of their experiences in various ways which influence the sort of value systems they develop and that disorienting dilemmas often challenge the validity of one's values and the assumptions that underpin them. It exemplifies how Mezirow's theory can be put into practice in Adult and Higher Education via three case studies undertaken by the authors in different places, at different times and with different sets of learners. These include mature aged women returning to study, PhDs at a Swedish Engineering University, and domestic and international students studying at an Australian regional university. The case studies make use of a values survey, interviews and subsequent focus groups. Data from the survey and interviews are analysed and used to argue that transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) can be practiced, to good effect, in university staff development*

and teacher education courses.

**Keywords:** *Transformative learning; Adult and Higher Education; Academic development.*

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## **Introduction**

One of the research questions that informs this paper asks ‘Can transformative learning theory be put into practice, and if yes, what are some of the differences it makes to the lives of learners?’ A more specific question is ‘Can disorienting dilemmas be triggered by carefully designed exercises, and, if yes, what are the effects on student transformative learning?’ To do this we need first to define and critically review Mezirow’s theory, which has, over time, become known as transformative learning theory. According to Mezirow, this theory explains how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences, how social and other structures influence the way they construe that experience, and how the dynamics involved in modifying meanings undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow’s theory owes much to the critical theorists and, in particular, to Jurgen Habermas. Habermas’s theory of Communicative Action (1984 and 1986) postulates that there are different types of action that are motivated by different types of reason. He labels his first category Strategic or Instrumental Action. This type of action uses unilateral, non-inclusive means to achieve its aims when the end is considered important enough. Communicative Action uses understanding and agreement, via a process of rational and fair discourse, to achieve a mutually acceptable end (Gougoulakis & Christie, 2012). According to Habermas ‘the system-world’ that includes the market, government and non-government organizations, has been increasingly characterized by Strategic or Instrumental Action. Habermas does not exclude the use of communicative action in the system world but is concerned that instrumental reason and action, which is most often found there, is ‘colonizing’ both public and private spheres of ‘the life-world’ (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003, 101). Jack Mezirow’s theory is much more focused on individual transformation but it too emphasizes rational and non-coercive dialogue as a means to make a change for the better. The aim of transformative learning is to

help individuals challenge the current assumptions on which they act and, if they find them wanting, to change them. This includes a mental shift as well as a behavioural one. The hope of transformative learning is that better individuals will build a better world.

### **Mezirow's Theory and Action Research**

Mezirow's theory, expressed in lay terms, argues that every individual has a particular view of the world. The particular worldview may or may not be well articulated but it is usually based on a set of paradigmatic assumptions that derive from the individual's upbringing, life experience, culture or education. When asked to explain their worldview most individuals say, in effect, 'The world is this way because'. Their explanation is, in turn, based on a set of causal assumptions that are often ingrained and well rehearsed. If the individual is especially committed to his or her worldview it is highly likely that a proselytising element will creep in. In that case the individual may argue that 'The world should be this way', which is a position grounded in a set of prescriptive assumptions. Mezirow claimed that individuals have difficulty changing because their worldviews become unconscious frames of reference constructed of habits of the mind. He argues that particular points of view can become so ingrained that it takes a powerful human catalyst, a forceful argument or what he calls a disorienting dilemma to shake them.

In a collection of papers appropriately entitled, *In Defense of the Lifeworld* (Welton, 1995), Mezirow referred back to his extensive 1978 national study that he conducted on behalf of the US Department of Education. His study could be described as an action research project (Lewin, 1946 and Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998) since it was collaborative, participatory and sought to improve an aspect of society, in this case, second chance education for women. The Department wanted to know why so many women were returning to study and what effects their studies had on them. Mezirow was able to report that a return to study often lead to 'consciousness raising' on the part of many women and that the process tended to occur in a number of steps. He listed these as:

1. Disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Sense of alienation

4. Relating discontent to others
5. Explaining options of new behaviour
6. Building confidence in new ways
7. Planning a course of action
8. Knowledge to implement plans
9. Experimenting with new roles
10. Reintegration.

On the basis of this early study, Mezirow, in dialogue and debate with other adult educational theorists, has postulated, refined, and, at times, revised his theory of transformative learning. An essential element of Mezirow's theory is the need to develop communicative skills so that internal and external conflicts, which result from changes in perspective, can be resolved via rational discourse rather than force. Mezirow has argued that rational discourse demands complete and accurate information, freedom from coercion or distorting self-deception, an ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively, an openness to other points of view, an equal opportunity to participate, critical reflection of assumptions and a willingness to accept informed, objective and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity. The insistence on rationality as a key to 'Communicative Action' and eventual transformation has been a contested aspect of transformation theory. In the following section we refer to this and other critiques of the theory. We also respond to a call for more integration between practice based research and transformative learning by introducing three case studies in the latter part of the paper that exemplify how the relationship between the two can be symbiotic. We argue, as does Taylor (2007), that the combination can 'ultimately result...in a more informed practice for fostering transformative learning and an effective method of classroom research...'.

### **Reconceptualising transformative learning**

Mezirow's theory and its importance to academia can be gauged by the number of masters and doctoral students who used it as a basis for their dissertations in the two decades following his publication of 'Perspective Transformation' in the 1978 edition of *Adult Education Quarterly* (1978a, vol. 28:100-110). At least thirty-nine dissertations were written in North America alone. In 1997 Edward Taylor analysed

these dissertations in a critical review submitted to the *Adult Education Quarterly* (hereafter *AEQ*). His article was called 'Building upon the theoretical debate: A critical review of the empirical studies of Mezirow's transformative learning theory' (Taylor, 1997). He concluded that the studies showed that the influence of context in transformative learning has to be better understood and accounted for, that critical reflection is important but that other ways of knowing must also be included, and that diversity in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation has to be addressed. His reference to a debate refers to a series of articles in the *AEQ* in which Mezirow was challenged and responded to criticisms of his theory. As early as 1989, in the Forum section of *AEQ*, Collard and Law argued that he failed to emphasize the importance of collective social action as a goal (Collard & Law, 1989). Mezirow responded, in the same year, by pointing out that 'There are significant mediating factors which impede taking collective social action because of a transformed viewpoint' (Mezirow, 1989). He explained the factors and defended the theory by arguing that both learning transformations and social action can take several forms and categorizing them is difficult. A few years later Clark and Wilson also submitted an article to *AEQ* entitled 'Context and rationality in Mezirow's theory of transformational learning' (Clark & Wilson, 1991). They argued that a major flaw in Mezirow's theory was that it fails to account for context. They saw the need for 'a contextualized view of rationality which maintains the essential link between meaning and experience'.

The critique concerning context was raised once more in 1993 when an Australian Adult educator and researcher, Mark Tennant, insisted that Mezirow's theory did not recognize the socially constructed nature of development, including developmental stages in adult life (Tennant, 1993). Again the article appeared in the *AEQ* and in the following year the journal catered for the interest surrounding Mezirow's theory by publishing another article by Tennant and a fellow Australian, Michael Newman together with an article by Mezirow himself, entitled 'Response to Mark Tennant and Michael Newman (Tennant, 1994; Newman, 1994; Mezirow, 1994). At the 35th Annual Adult Education Research Conference at the University of Tennessee that year, the Group for Collaborative Inquiry sought 'to reconceptualise transformative learning and social action and recognise learning-in-relationships and whole person learning'. The Group claimed that Mezirow emphasized

rationality (cognition) at the expense of 'other ways of knowing, including...affective, somatic, intuitive and spiritual' ways (Taylor, 1997). The growing popularity of Howard Gardner's 'seven intelligences model' (Gardner, 1983) may have encouraged this criticism.

Stephen Brookfield, in his overview of adult education (Tuinjmans, 1995) summed up a number of the above criticisms and implied others in his concluding paragraph. Our case studies provide examples of how some of these criticisms can be overcome in research based practice. Brookfield nominated ten areas for future research in adult education. Defining the notion of learning was the first. Researching relevant aspects of emotional intelligence in transformative learning a second. A third was that 'adult learning needs to be understood much more as a socially embedded and socially constructed phenomenon' (Jarvis, 1987). Brookfield also noted that more cross-cultural perspectives were needed 'to break the Eurocentric and North American dominance in research in adult learning'. There was a similar need, he said, to research the role played by gender in adult learning as well as a need to encompass work on spiritual and personal learning in order to understand the interconnections between these domains. His final four 'areas' of required research included the need for 'More phenomenographic studies of how adults feel their way through learning episodes', a greater emphasis on qualitative studies, by practitioners as well as academics, more integration of research on adult learning needs with research into adult development, adult cognition and the links between adult learning and learning at other stages in the lifespan (Brookfield, 1995).

In his 1997 *AEQ* review Taylor regretted the fact that so few of the theses he critiqued had been turned into journal articles. He summarized their content, taking note of the ways in which they modified or used Mezirow's theory. While he acknowledged the influence of Mezirow's theory, which in many respects had displaced Knowles's theory of Andragogy (Knowles, 1980), he concluded that it was important to guard against 'the reification of transformative learning theory' by encouraging scholars to reconceptualise it (Taylor, 1997). Ten years later, in the same journal, Taylor updated this critical review (Taylor, 2007). In the latter study he analysed 40 peer reviewed journal articles and concluded that 'transformative learning in adult, higher and continuing education has been around for over 25 years and continues to be the

most researched and discussed theory in the field of adult education' (Taylor, 2007). Seven years later the claim appears to have stood the test of time. In the March 2014 edition of *AEQ* the journal listed its most cited articles. The top ten listing clearly indicated how important Mezirow's impact was. The ten most cited articles, in order, were Mezirow's 1994 'Understanding Transformation Theory' article, Taylor's 1997 critical review, a 1994 article entitled 'Intercultural Competency: A Transformative Learning Process', three articles by Jack Mezirow (1996, 1998, 1981), a critical review article by Sharan Merriam, Clarke's critique of Mezirow and finally two articles on self-directed learning by Brookfield (1984) and Low (1991). Mezirow's theory continues to have practical impact for adult learning, which is evidenced by the recent publication of *The Handbook of Transformative Learning. Theory, Research and Practice* (Taylor and Cranton, 2012) and by an annual international conference on Transformative Learning. On the other hand, Michael Newman's well-argued article 'Calling Transformative Learning Into Question: Some Mutinous Thoughts' published in *AEQ* in 2012 reveals just how controversial the theory continues to be, at least among academics.

### **Engaging action research and transformative learning to better understand both**

One of Taylor's key findings in his 2007 meta-review was that 'More research is needed that simultaneously engages action research and transformative learning to better understand their relationship...' (Taylor, 2007). The following case studies are informed by the philosophy of John Dewey (1916) and adhere to the action research principles of Kurt Lewin (1946). They follow the methodological recommendations of Carr and Kemmis (1983) and make use of the principles of participatory action research developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). The intention of all action research is to make changes for the better and in this sense, action research is both partisan and transformative (Mezirow, 1991). Since Kemmis and McTaggart's 1988 publication, action research has become increasingly relevant to educational improvement. Recent books and new editions on action research (Spaulding & Falco, 2013; McNiff, 3rd ed. 2013) encourage teachers at all levels to instigate their own research projects as a way of improving the learning outcomes of their students. Action research

involves a spiral process of planning, acting, observing, analysing, reflecting and then evaluating. The completion of one full cycle generally raises other issues that will be researched and acted upon in a new cycle. Because of this there is a natural affinity with transformative learning, which on the individual level also progresses through a spiral of steps. Action research is often sparked by a dilemma in one's professional practice just as individual transformation can begin with a disorienting dilemma. The methods and techniques we have used in our case studies also replicate some aspects of action research and transformative learning. Both the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) and focus groups (Lewin, 1946) require analytical and critical reflection. The former often focuses on the individual while the latter, as the name suggests, is more of a collective process. All of the following cases seek to combine, understand and add value to both the action research and the transformative learning processes.

### **A case of consciousness raising**

As an adult educator the first author taught a group of mature aged women who enrolled in a Graduate Diploma course for Adult and Vocational Educators at a regional university in Australia. Mezirow's break-through 1975 article was entitled 'Education for Perspective Transformation: Women's Re-entry Programs in Community Colleges' and many of the findings in that work were replicated in the course mentioned above. As a group of learners mature aged women face a rather special set of challenges because of the combination of their age, gender and previous education. Christie (1995) asked the women in his course to keep a critical incident file of their experiences and these, combined with informal interviews, revealed that their transformations were at times dramatic and involved painful conflicts. Attitudes, views and beliefs that had been internalised as 'habits of the mind' were shaken, questioned and rejected when exposed to transformative learning practices. For example, the belief that 'a woman's place is in the home' was undermined, the assumptions underpinning it challenged, and a new perspective enacted. The changed ways of seeing the world and the women's subsequent behaviour caused conflicts, especially with life partners. Some of the women said that enrolling had been the first step on what was a difficult journey. They believed that choosing to return to study had indicated that they were ripe for change. The course

itself raised other questions, arguments and disorienting dilemmas. The women met different sorts of role models among their fellow students and the teaching staff, and exposure to the theory of transformative learning, and transformative practices, like the values exercise described below, accelerated the process of questioning and rejecting some of the assumptions by which they had lived. Transformation rarely occurs unless the individual is convinced it is necessary. When the women acted on their changed view of the world the external conflicts that resulted were settled by a whole range of verbal, physical and legal possibilities: angry words, sometimes blows, divorce proceedings and, far too rarely the fourth alternative - rational argument. The process was often painful but the result for the women (and hopefully even for the men) was greater independence, personal integrity and eventually increased happiness.

### **Transforming views – changing practice**

All four authors have been involved with Papuan and PNG teachers who undertake Master of Education courses at a regional university in Australia and their insights have contributed to the second case. The case is part of an ongoing action research project that involves practising teachers from the developing province of Papua, Indonesia. The participants were enrolled as part of a ten week program that addressed the Papuan teachers' need to enhance their English language proficiency and upgrade their teaching practices and pedagogical knowledge. The study, conducted in 2009-2010 by the second and third authors found, through post-course interviews, that the participants had transformed their teaching practices and epistemological perspectives after returning to their Papuan primary and secondary English teaching contexts. They had been confronted by many disorienting dilemmas in Australia. These included realizing that English could be taught in ways that they had not imagined possible at home, where a strict knowledge-transmission system applied and where there was an over emphasis on rote learning in preparation for National Tests. The teachers also encountered dilemmas that confronted their perspectives on teacher authority. The Australian lecturers were surprisingly friendly and informal and were not afraid of making or admitting mistakes. The transcripts from the interviews indicate that the Papuan teachers started questioning some assumptions underlying the view that a teacher needed to exert his

or her authority in order to teach. The more informal manner of the Australians and their willingness to admit that they too were learners, gave Papuan teachers greater confidence in using their English during the course as well as changing their teaching style back home. Seeing that one could admit a mistake but still maintain authority led (H) to comment: *'[Now] I say to my students that I'm learning English like you. It's better we check the dictionary' [when previously she was ashamed to admit she couldn't define some words].*

The flexibly delivered program involved 12 primary and secondary teachers and the main intervention in terms of action research was that the curriculum could be changed as the program progressed to cater for the needs and wants of the learner cohort (Carey & Robertson, 2014). Monitoring and evaluation was conducted via weekly meetings with an intermediary Indonesian-speaking researcher and through personal student diaries shared through a web log. This mode of delivery, monitoring and evaluation simultaneously engaged action research and transformative learning and allowed for small interventions that informed the *in situ* modification of the program. The program contained three main activities that challenged the participants' cultural and pedagogical schema: English proficiency development which involved immersion in the Australian culture and language through four weeks living in a home-stay setting; lectures and workshops on modern Western pedagogy, including visits to several Australian schools to view lessons and speak to teachers; and, peer-teaching to apply the new pedagogical perspectives and teaching methods with their peers in reflective teaching sessions.

Seven months after the program, the researchers visited the participants in Papua and some substantial transformative learning outcomes were revealed through semi-structured interviews. The twelve participants were asked 'How do you perceive the University program as having impacted on your conceptions of yourselves as English language teachers, your knowledge of your field and on your teaching practice? Their responses revealed that they had improved their relationships with their students due to the realisation that their Papuan tradition of maintaining power distance was interfering with building trust with students. One informant (B) said that *'The culture here makes it very hard for the teachers to come close with students... Sometimes the*

*teachers have to show they are humble to the student... If we have some behaviour like that, it seems our students will feel comfortable and come closer to us'. The teachers also demonstrated an increased sense of agency. This is evidenced by the following comment from (J): 'My students say ... "you are very different than before. When you came to our class before, you just came in with your book in front at the teacher's desk (and now) you walk around and use a lot of English in speaking"... and they are really interested in English'. The teachers also reported on an increased repertoire of classroom practices and how they had changed not just as English language instructors but also as people. One, (Y), said: 'I was surprised these methods (group work) make working with big classes easier'. Another, (D), admitted: 'Before I always followed what's in the book, but now realised no, I have to make the lesson myself...I don't need to blame the government for something; it forced me to make my own ideas come out to help the students'. Some of the Papuan teachers have been awarded scholarships to undertake the Master of TESOL Education at the regional university where the study was conducted.*

### **Triggering Disorienting Dilemmas**

In 2012 the Finnish scholar Kaisu Mälkki published a study (Mälkki, 2012) in which she explained how disorienting dilemmas could trigger changes in one's attitudes, beliefs and values. Since 2006 the first author has used an anonymous values survey in workshops aimed at increasing learners' awareness of the ways in which they see the world. The workshop began with students filling out a 'values survey' (Appendix A). The anonymous survey asked participants to give their views on ten controversial issues, namely euthanasia, immigration quotas, genetics research, the death penalty, privatization, internet censorship, abortion, working for unemployment benefits, adoption by gay couples, and nuclear disarmament. The participants responded to the survey by circling a number on a five-point scale to indicate where they stood on each issue. The survey had two statements about each issue; one was on the left of the five-point scale and one on the right. For example, the first issue was about euthanasia and the statement on the left said 'Euthanasia (mercy killing) should be legalised' while the one on the right said 'Euthanasia should not be legalised'. If one were convinced about the statement on the left, one would circle the number 1; if

moderately sure then number 2; if unsure then number 3. If, however, one strongly believed that 'Euthanasia should not be legalised', then number 5 would be circled, or number 4 if one believed that proposition less strenuously.

While the results from the survey were being turned into graphs for a PowerPoint presentation, students were given a clean survey sheet, divided into groups of eight and asked, in the first instance, to use the sheets to predict the general result of the survey. If an individual felt that, out of all those who filled out the survey a majority would favour the legalization of euthanasia, he or she would circle the numbers 1 & 2. If it were thought the majority would 'fence sit', then number 3 would be circled. If the individual thought most people would not want to legalize euthanasia then 4 & 5 would be circled. If the individual predicted that the response would be evenly spread, he or she would circle all the numbers. When all the predictions were completed in a group, the results were revealed and a discussion followed on why individuals had predicted the way they did. This discussion included whether or not individuals were influenced in their predictions by their own 'frames of reference', or, where they predicted a result that was very different from their own position, why they thought the majority would hold such a different view from them. Once the group had created a new sheet that mirrored the total groups' collective predictions, the actual results of the survey were revealed and a new phase of discussion occurred.

For the plenary discussion the groups were asked to report back on where they most obviously agreed and disagreed. They also explained why they thought such differences had occurred and commented on the 'sources' of the values that were contained in the survey. The plenary session provided data on the sorts of disorienting dilemmas that faced some students. Appendix B provides the results from two contrasting groups. One group that was divided into three workshops was made up of 81 PhD students at a Swedish Technological University: 28 females and 53 males. The average age of the group was mid to late twenties. Approximately 60% were Swedish nationals and 40% non-Swedish. The latter group come from a wide range of countries including East European, European, Asian and South American countries as well as places like Russia and China. Because of the variety of languages, English was used as the means of instruction but small group work

could occur in one's own language if there were sufficient numbers. The PhD group answered the survey and undertook the workshop in 2007 in Sweden. The other group comprised 53 final year teacher education students in an Australian pre-service course and they did the workshop in 2014. In the Australian sample the majority of the cohort was female. There were 45 women and 8 men. Most of the group was in their early twenties although there was one male and five females in their middle age. In the plenary session no one was required to reveal their own position on any of the issues but a minority in each group did so. These people tended to be staunch advocates of a particular value and fitted into the category described earlier as those who felt that 'this is the way the world should be' at least on that particular issue. The overall result of the plenary sessions was that participants engaged in a stimulating debate on the way that class, society, religion, politics, economics or family upbringing can affect world-views. The debate raised awareness and in some cases set in motion disorienting dilemmas that lead to transformative learning. Analysis of data from subsequent focus groups (to be presented in another article focussing solely on this topic) will provide more insight into the degree and nature of such change.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this article was to test if transformative learning theory can be put into practice and to exemplify, if it is successful, what sort of differences it can make to learning and learners. It also sought to test how one might trigger disorienting dilemmas. The values exercise, which has been used since 2006 in different settings and with different types of students, demonstrates one way this can be done. The exercise helped students to acknowledge that no matter how objective they endeavour to be in the classroom, differences in values exist, and those differences, if they come to the surface, can help or hinder learning. Combining action research and transformative learning in this case helps us understand both. The case illustrates how learners can become aware of the paradigmatic, causal and prescriptive assumptions they hold and perhaps question whether they are valid or not. This first step of recognizing that we hold ingrained views of the world can lead to subsequent steps that are not only required to change invalid assumptions but also the behaviour that is based on them.

If students are given the motivation, the means and the knowledge necessary to critically assess, challenge and change their assumptions they will have the chance to become lifelong learners capable of acting for the best in a rapidly changing world. Workshops, embedded in action research projects, where students are introduced to the theory of transformative learning and provided with tools to develop critical, analytical reflection could be used as a model for a critical awareness course. If students are more critically aware, then they will be able to transfer the knowledge they acquire in their discipline to new and unexpected situations once they graduate and enter their particular professions. Courses and workshops that are constructivist in nature can reveal the way in which all knowledge in all fields are social constructs, and offer participants an opportunity to reconsider their own world view and critique the assumptions that underlie that view. If they decide that some of those assumptions are invalid they have the possibility to change both their beliefs and their behaviour. If enough individuals within a field change, the field itself has a chance to change.

Mezirow would say that such change must always be provisional. He once quoted a bumper sticker he saw in New York. The sticker read 'subvert the dominant paradigm'. When paradigms dominate, at either the individual, group, institutional or state level it is probably time to begin to question, if not subvert them. The best way to do that is to train people to think for themselves. Transformative learning is another term for independent thought. It helps us critique our own thought processes, our points of view and the fields that shaped them, whether they are family, friends, fashion, the media, academic disciplines, educational institutions, church or state. Transformative learning adds value to other types of organised learning by helping us to regularly re-assess the validity of our learning and enables us to apply what we learn in unexpected situations. Because of this it has a place in all forms of university and adult education.

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## Appendix A

### Differing world views

(an anonymous survey)

Read each pair of statements below and then estimate your position on each. For example, with statement 1, if you believe very strongly that euthanasia should be legalised, you would put a ring around '1'. If you think that it should not, put a ring around '5'.

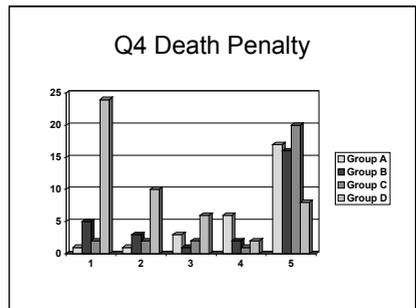
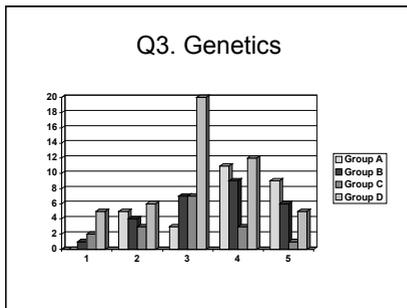
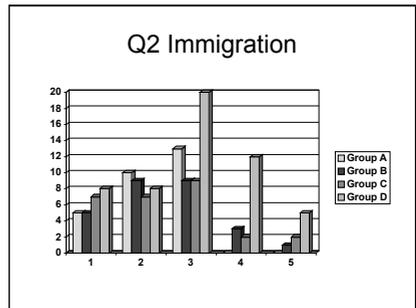
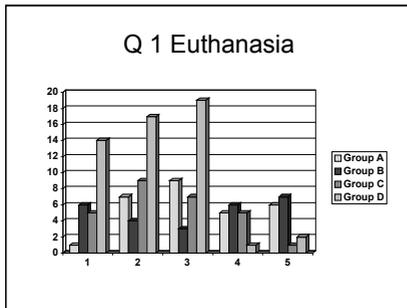
1. Euthanasia (mercy killing) should be legalised.	1 2 3 4 5	Euthanasia should not be legalised.
2. 'Developed countries' should increase their immigration quota.	1 2 3 4 5	'Developed countries' should decrease their immigration quota.
3. Scientists should be free to carry out all types of genetic research.	1 2 3 4 5	Governments should control the nature and scope of genetic research.
4. The death penalty is appropriate for some crimes	1 2 3 4 5	The death penalty is never appropriate no matter what the crime
5. Privatisation of public facilities (eg power and water) is a good thing.	1 2 3 4 5	Privatisation of public facilities (eg power and water) is a bad thing.
6. Governments should censor pornography on the internet.	1 2 3 4 5	Governments should not censor pornography on the internet.
7. Abortion is every woman's right.	1 2 3 4 5	Abortion is morally wrong.
8. Unemployed people should be made to work for their unemployment benefits.	1 2 3 4 5	Unemployed people should not be made to work for their unemployment benefits.
9. Gay couples should be allowed to raise children.	1 2 3 4 5	Gay couples should not be allowed to raise children.
10. Nuclear weapons should be banned and those in existence destroyed.	1 2 3 4 5	The existence of nuclear weapons is an effective deterrent to global war.

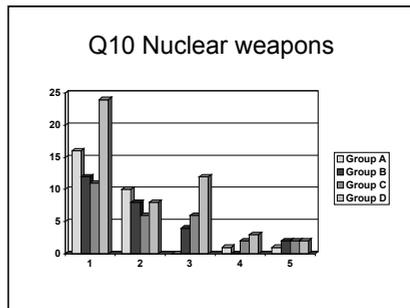
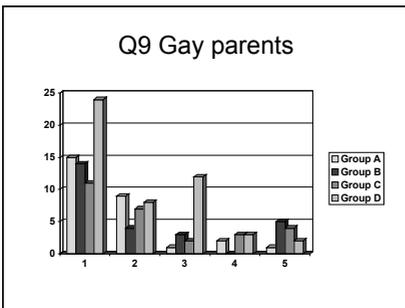
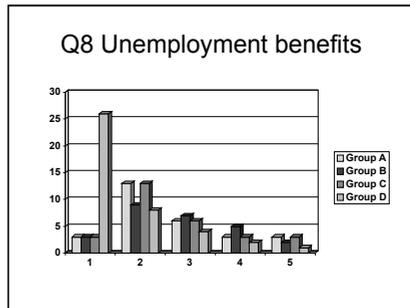
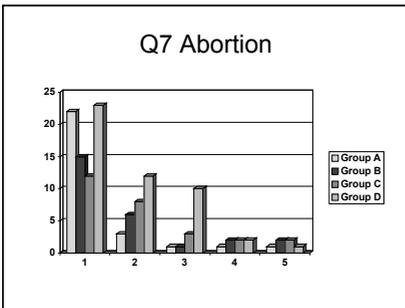
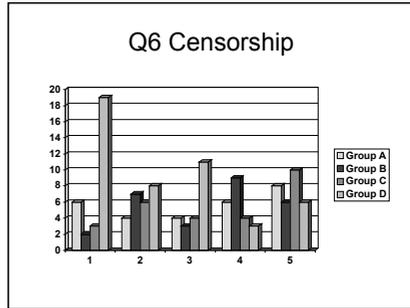
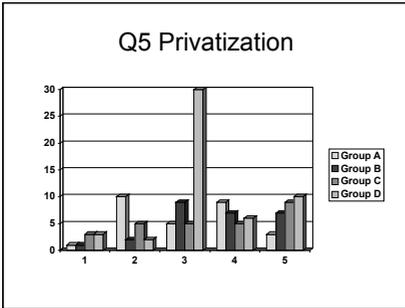
## Appendix B

**Differing world values and views**

A comparative survey

- Results of the survey administered to 3 groups of Swedish PhDs (Groups A,B & C) and one group of final year Australian teacher education students (Group D)
- Not all students answer all questions
- Approximate total for groups A,B & C is 80
- Approximate total for groups D is 50





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## **Self-advocacy and its impacts for adults with developmental disabilities**

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*The following review of literature illuminates self-advocacy from a North American transformational learning perspective via meaningful impacts, which arise for adults with developmental disabilities, as well as various communities and their members. For adults with developmental disabilities, increased leadership capabilities and the evolution of new self-concepts continue to be powerful examples of the impact of self-advocacy. For communities, a more prominent voice and personable research within the academic community, increased awareness for some boards and committee members, and the acknowledgement and support of local or online community members are broad examples of the impacts self-advocacy has on us.*

**Keywords:** *self-advocacy, developmental disabilities, transformational learning*

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### **Background**

The purpose of this review of literature was to explore self-advocacy

for adults with Developmental Disabilities (DD) and highlight transformative elements. Aspects of self-advocacy and its impact on self-advocates, supports, and communities were examined. We examined self-advocacy as a construct; developed an improved understanding of the differences and connections between self-advocacy and self-determination, and explored the learning adults with DD experience as a result of self-advocacy. We then synthesized the impacts of self-advocacy on adults with DD, their supports, and community members as revealed in current literature.

### **Intellectual disability**

Intellectual disability is another term used in reference to people with cognitive limitations. According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2013), an intellectual disability is “...a disability characterized by significant limitations both in **intellectual functioning** (reasoning, learning, problem solving) and in **adaptive behavior**, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills . . . originates before the age of 18” (AAIDD, 2013). Used primarily in the United States, this is contrasted with the term DD, which is considered to be an umbrella term for disabilities that can be cognitive, physical, or both (AAIDD, 2013).

In Ontario, Canada, the term DD is the current term used by Developmental Service Providers (DSP) working in developmental services. The Ontario Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act (2008) stated,

A person has a developmental disability . . . if the person has the prescribed significant limitations in cognitive functioning and adaptive functioning and those limitations, (a) originated before the person reached 18 years of age; (b) are likely to be life-long in nature; and (c) affect areas of major life activity such as personal care, language skills, learning abilities, the capacity to live independently as an adult or any other prescribed activity. . .” (s. 3.1)

In contrast to the United States’ use of the term, DD in Ontario shares a similar definition to that of learning disability in Britain and intellectual disability in the United States. For the purposes of this review the term

DD will be used to describe adults participating in self-advocacy groups.

### **An Exemplar: Malala Yousafzai**

Recently, Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani woman shot in the head by the Taliban last year, addressed the United Nations (Vaidyanathan, 2013). Speaking at a special youth assembly, Malala advocated for education for children around the world and spoke out about the importance of education to countering terrorism and extremism (Vaidyanathan, 2013). She also presented a petition with more than three million signatures demanding education for all (Vaidyanathan, 2013). To quote Malala, “The terrorists thought that they would change my aims and stop my ambitions . . . but nothing changed in my life, except this: weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born” (Vaidyanathan, 2013, para. 8). Reading about her keynote, one cannot help but be moved and inspired by her courage and her advocacy. Her words highlight a self-transformation borne of her belief in a cause important to her. Her actions, and others’ responses to her actions, demonstrate how one person’s aims may connect with the aims of others to begin collective action. Malala is an example of a self-advocate as well as an advocate for the children and youth worldwide without access to education that she represents.

Yet one does not need to read international news to find a reason to be uplifted or to be encouraged to speak up about an important cause. In Ontario, changes in the developmental services sector and an increase in the desire for agency accreditation are aligning to support the development of self-advocacy groups for and by adults with developmental disabilities. It appears that what started as a movement is leading to groups with organized and personalized purpose. Consequently, there is a need to explore the aspects of self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities and the impacts self-advocacy has on self-advocates, supports, and communities in greater depth.

### **Self-Advocacy Features**

Exploring self-advocacy led to an intricate web of answers. Initially focused on only the educational aspects of self-advocacy, it quickly became apparent that defining self-advocacy, outlining its key features and offering an explanation of their educational importance to self-

advocacy would improve the clarity of this literature review. Central to self-advocacy is the concept of self-determination (Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013). The foundation self-determination forms for self-advocacy and their interdependence are critical to our research question which asks; what are the aspects of self-advocacy.

In a survey of self-advocacy groups across the United Kingdom, McNally (2003) asked respondents to describe what self-advocacy meant to each group; one group suggested:

Giving your views. Being listened to. Make our own choices. Able to make our own mistakes. Improving our life to be independent. We feel when we are treated as an adult and listened to [we are] . . . seen as an individual to make our own disions [*sic*] with or without Assistant [*sic*]. Then we can have our own houses, relationships and jobs. Our main thing is to be taken seriously and listened to. (p. 238)

This definition highlights the interconnectedness of self-determination and self-advocacy. It also demonstrates how voices previously not often heard are speaking out about a desire to make their own choices. When self-advocates are taken seriously and listened to as suggested, a dialogue that enables increased community engagement, thereby promoting the social model of disability and improving quality of life, may result. However, to do this requires a richer understanding of what self-advocacy is and what qualities contribute to its success.

### **Defining self-advocacy and types of self-advocacy**

According to Schreiner (2007) self-advocacy is simply “the ability to speak up for what we want and need” (p. 300). Individual self-advocacy is speaking or acting for oneself and deciding what is best of oneself (Brandt, n.d.). Conversely, group self-advocacy is when individuals join together to advocate for a common cause (Brandt, n.d.). This may also be referred to as public advocacy if it increases awareness and/or educates others (ID Action Team, 2012).

A self-advocacy group can take on different forms. According to Crawley (1988, as cited in Brandt, n.d.), self-advocacy groups may have one of four different typologies. A self-advocacy group may be autonomous,

meaning that is independent from outside influence (Crawley, 1988, as cited in Brandt, n.d.). Or, a self-advocacy group may utilize a divisional model, whereby self-advocacy is promoted within an existing organization's structure (Crawley 1988, as cited in Brandt, n.d.). The third typology is the coalition model, which uses a cross-disability philosophy and works across disability groups (Crawley 1988, as cited in Brandt, n.d.). Finally, the service system model is another typology and is one that arose from service providers supporting self-advocacy groups within their own organizations (Crawley, 1988, as cited in Brandt, n.d.). Therefore, the importance of learning to make choices for oneself (be self-determined) is the key prerequisite for effective self-advocacy.

### **Self-determination and its differing perspectives**

Self-determination is important to self-advocacy because it provides the self-advocate with the attitude, abilities and skills to identify personal goals and to take the initiative to reach them (ID Action Team, 2012, para. 3). Field and Hoffman (1994, as cited in Johnson, 1999) define self-determination as, "one's ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself" (p. 164). Thus, defining self-determination and exploring different perspectives of its development becomes important to the topic of self-advocacy. Two such perspectives on self-determination are the social-ecological perspective (Walker et al., 2011) and causal agency theory (Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013).

#### **The social-ecological perspective**

The social-ecological perspective of self-determination described by Walker et al. (2011) indicates self-determination is a psychological construct that can be found within the broader theory of human agency. Human agency refers to our capacity to make choices and to impose or assert these choices in our lives (Walker et al., 2011). Those who may not have direct control over situations can still assert agency through proxy (Bandura, 2001, as cited in Walker et al., 2011). According to Bandura (2001, as cited in Walker et al., 2011), proxy agency is when, ". . . people try by one means or another to get those who have access to resources or expertise . . . to act at their behest to secure the outcomes they desire" (p. 9). Grounded in human agency theories, the social-ecological perspective of self-determination considers human beings

to be active players in the events of their lives, whether through direct action or indirect action via proxy.

Another key aspect of the social-ecological perspective of self-determination is the recognition of the role environment plays in our choices through the use of person-environment interaction models (Walker et al., 2011). When a person interacts with his or her environment in a self-determined manner, the interaction is evenly distributed between enhancing the capacity of the person and changing the expectations of the environment (Walker et al., 2011). This can be impactful for self-advocacy because, if the interaction balances the individual with the environment, then skills in balancing rights with responsibilities and developing a solutions-focused approach to problem-solving can be learned through the development of self-determination skills (Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013). This may make the development and practice of self-advocacy skills easier to undertake for adults with DD.

### **Causal agency theory**

Causal agency theory stems from a belief that there is a need to move beyond self-determination as a construct and to focus on the best ways to promote people living self-determined lives (Wehmeyer, 2004). This requires operationalizing three focal points: (a) enhancing people's skills that enable them to become more self-determined, (b) identifying and promoting opportunities, contexts and environments that promote enhanced self-determination, and (c) identifying the supports that can contribute to enhanced self-determination (Wehmeyer, 2004). Causal agency becomes the framework to explain how people become causal agents in their lives and, therefore, live in more self-determined ways (Wehmeyer, 2004).

Causal agency theory implies that the individual who makes or causes things to happen in his or her life does so for the purpose of causing an effect that will accomplish a specific end or initiate a change (Wehmeyer, 2004). Outcomes are dependent upon the person's capabilities and the challenges to self-determination that he or she faces (Wehmeyer, 2004). There are two types of capability: (a) causal capability that is the mental or physical capacity that enables a person to cause or make something happen, and (b) agentic capability that is the mental or physical capacity

that enables a person to direct causal action (Wehmeyer, 2004). Just as there are two types of capability, there are also two kinds of challenges to self-determination. One type of challenge is opportunities, which are challenges that provoke actions to achieve desired outcomes (Wehmeyer, 2004). The second type of challenges is threats, which are challenges that invoke self-determination in order to maintain a desired outcome (Wehmeyer, 2004). Causal agency theory is helpful for self-advocacy because it operationalizes self-determination. This places a focus on the active development of skills that can be of future assistance when developing self-advocacy capabilities.

While both the social-ecological model and causal agency theory consider those involved to be causal agents actively participating in their lives, the social-ecological model places an added emphasis on the interdependence between an individual and the environment to self-advocacy. Conversely, causal agency theory considers the environment from a more active view, citing challenges – opportunities or threats – as the contextual factor involved in self-determination. Both perspectives highlight the importance of decision-making and active participation to effective self-determination.

### **Self-determination and self-advocacy: relatedness**

Van Reusen et al. (1994, as cited in Van Reusen, 1996) defined self-advocacy as, “. . . an individual’s ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert his or her interests, desires, needs and rights. It assumes the ability to make informed decisions. It also means taking responsibility for those decisions” (p. 50). The assumption of the ability to make informed decisions underscores the importance of self-determination to self-advocacy. The importance of decision-making to self-determination, and consequently to self-advocacy, is further supported by Johnson (1999) who noted that some of the most important components of self-determination are choice making, decision making, self-observation, self-awareness and self-knowledge. Thus, while self-determination is not self-advocacy and self-advocacy is not self-determination, the two appear to be inextricably linked.

The effects of self-determination and its required development of self-awareness and decision-making skills can be impactful in the lives of adults with developmental disabilities. For example, Heller et al. (2011) associated self-determination with enhanced empowerment outcomes,

health and psychological well-being and increased independence. In a study comparing self-determination levels with the quality of life of 182 adults worldwide with mild DD living in community environments, Lachapelle et al. (2005) found through the use of discriminate function analysis that when an individual possessed each essential characteristic of self-determination identified by the authors, he or she placed in the highest quality of life group. The identified essential characteristics of self-determination were autonomous functioning, self-regulation, psychological empowerment and self-realization (Lachapelle et al., 2005; Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013).

The self-realization noted by the authors above, coupled with the self-observation, self-awareness and self-knowledge noted by Johnson (1999) in discussing self-determination, connect with the ability to communicate and assert one's own interests, needs and rights noted in the previous definition of self-advocacy (Van Reusen et al., 1994, as cited in Van Reusen, 1996). Furthermore, the emphasis on self-regulation (Lachapelle et al., 2005) and decision-making (Johnson, 1999) found in self-determination links to the assumption in the definition of self-advocacy that people make their own informed decisions. As a result, self-determination and self-advocacy become interconnected on many levels, with self-determination providing a foundation upon which self-advocacy may develop.

Lastly, the interrelation between self-determination and self-advocacy skills need not be limited by the severity of a person's disability. In a study of 301 participants from 27 different support agencies in 10 states, Wehmeyer and Garner (2003) found that, while there was a low correlation between self-determination and IQ level, with self-determination being somewhat lower for individuals with more severe developmental disabilities, it was not low enough to suggest that IQ itself can be a strong predictor of higher self-determination. Furthermore, no correlation was made between autonomous functioning and self-determination in the study, regardless of the severity of an individual's disability (Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003). This may be because, according to Olney (2001), our ability to communicate expresses itself through words, behaviours and their communicative content without waiting for permission to be shared. Based upon observations of adults with severe DD, Olney (2001) realized six components of successful

communication, which the author refers to as communicative agency. These include, actions, self-regulation strategies, context or semiotics, collaboration, shared knowledge, and vocal communication (Olney, 2001). Even those of us with few verbal communication skills may combine these six components, due to the contextual and collaborative components, to achieve successful communication (Olney, 2001). Thus, continuing to provide opportunities to practice self-determination skills in a supportive communicative environment may also ensure that adults with more severe developmental disabilities are also included in the effort to develop self-determination skills and in self-advocacy initiatives.

### **Impacts of self-advocacy**

Equipped with a deeper understanding of the aspects of self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities, DSPs may more clearly identify the impacts of self-advocacy on adults with DD, their supports, and communities. Examples of such impacts include enhanced leadership skills and self-transformation (self-perspective) for adults with DD (Caldwell, 2010). It is “a structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships” (Mezirow, 1978: 100). Perspective, perception and self-perspective are entwined and malleable. As well, research suggests that self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities impacts, not only adults with developmental disabilities, but their families and support staff (Caldwell, 2010). Ultimately, self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities impacts communities, including the academic community, boards or advisory bodies and the communities they represent, and local communities through projects and initiatives (Frawley & Bigby, 2011).

### **Impacts of self-advocacy on adults with DD**

The impacts of self-advocacy for adults with DD can be seen directly in adults with DD themselves. An example of these impacts is the growth in leadership capabilities of adults with DD (Frawley & Bigby, 2011). Another impact of self-advocacy for adults with DD is a change in self-concept (Gilmartin & Slevin, 2009). This change in self-concept is demonstrative of transformational learning as part of self-advocacy development (Mezirow, 1978; 2000).

## **Increased leadership capabilities for adults with DD**

The development of leadership capabilities is one impact of self-advocacy for adults with DD. Through semi-structured interviews with 13 leaders within the self-advocacy movement, Caldwell (2010) noted four primary themes, two of which directly relate to leadership: (a) the development of leadership skills, and (b) the availability of advanced leadership opportunities. Regarding the development of leadership capabilities, few leaders credited school experiences to building these skills, but rather credited volunteer opportunities, service on committees, experiences within the self-advocacy movement and leadership development workshops in assisting with the growth of leadership skills (Caldwell, 2010). It is these experiences within the self-advocacy movement that demonstrate the impact of enhanced leadership capabilities for adults with DD.

When discussing the second theme of the availability of advanced leadership opportunities, interviewees noted that few opportunities exist outside of the self-advocacy movement for leaders in the United States (Caldwell, 2010). These minimal opportunities are not limited to the U.S. Frawley and Bigby (2011) investigated the experiences of adults with DD on disability advisory boards in Australia. The participants in the study were the only 9 people (as of 2005) with a DD in Australia who were members of disability advisory bodies throughout the country (Frawley & Bigby, 2011). Furthermore, leadership development can be hindered in these limited existing opportunities. One of the intangible obstacles noted by study participants was the feeling that other members of the advisory body did not actively engage participants in conversations (Frawley & Bigby, 2011). As one participant noted, “it hasn’t always been smooth sailing because I have had to fight to get heard. Even now I don’t get heard” (Frawley & Bigby, 2011: 34). Consequently, while one impact of self-advocacy for adults with DD is the development of leadership capabilities, there is as of yet little room to exercise these skills outside of the self-advocacy movement or disability rights groups.

A third theme of note concerning the development of leadership capabilities for adults with DD is an interdependent quality of leadership that results from self-advocates’ experiences. Caldwell

(2010) revealed that leaders spoke in their interviews of embracing an interdependent approach to leadership; whereby they measured their leadership capability by the extent to which they assisted others in becoming leaders. A similar characteristic is addressed by Gilmartin and Slevin (2009) with regards to self-advocacy group participation. In their phenomenological study, the authors discuss how interdependence existed between group members. This was demonstrated when members would ensure that others who could not speak for themselves were heard in the course of meetings; for example by reading a recorded message or recording what somebody wanted to share on their behalf (Gilmartin & Slevin, 2009: 158). As a result, the theme of interdependence extends from self-advocacy leaders through to group members, impacting all participating self-advocates.

### **Transformative impacts for adults with developmental disabilities**

Another significant power within self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities is the transformative (Mezirow, 2000) impact it can have on self-advocates. For many, these transformative aspects mean a change in self-concept resulting from membership in a self-advocacy group. Mezirow (2000) claimed that perspective transformation, which “refers to the transforming of a problematic frame of reference to make it more dependable in our adult life by generating opinions and interpretations that are more justified” (Mezirow, 2000: 20), was a powerful growth process. Often, this means reflecting on negative, or even discriminatory, experiences and transcending these experiences to develop a new personal identity (Gilmartin & Slevin, 2009). As one self-advocacy group member remarked, “the way people will treat you, it’s where they’re at in life, it’s true now, it’s not only us like, it’s everywhere in life” (Gilmartin & Slevin, 2009: 157).

Researchers, Beart, Hardy, and Buchan (2004) concluded, that a key theme in all interviews was the idea of “changing selves” (p. 94). Six categories emerged as contributing to this change in self-concept, including joining the self-advocacy group, learning and doing self-advocacy, identifying the aims of the group, and having a positive social environment (Beart et al., 2004). Most notable for transformation are the fifth and sixth categories: a change in self-concept and an

interlinking of one's personal identity with that of the group (Beart et al., 2004).

Changes in self-concept for self-advocates included discussion of experiences of discrimination, bullying and even physical abuse and, at times, prompted a comparison with the past that included reflections on negative and emotionally painful events (Beart et al., 2004). The authors note that membership in the self-advocacy group meant for members that some negative experiences were given new meaning and that reflections on past experiences were viewed in light of new information (Beart et al., 2004). To transcend these revisited experiences, members re-emphasized the importance of collective action and support (Beart et al., 2004). As one group member noted: "It would be suicidal if we did things on our own . . ." (Beart et al., 2004: 97). Others would manage their experiences by turning them into a means of helping and informing others using such media as newsletters or videos (Beart et al., 2004). Once more, the theme of interdependence and measuring personal success by the extent to which you contribute to another's growth is evident in the transformational impacts of self-advocacy.

The transformation of self-concept and the choices that result because of this change reflect elements of transformational learning. Previous discussion of Friere's (2000) theory of transformational learning highlighted the importance of praxis. Praxis is defined as, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Friere, 2000: 51). The reflection upon negative experiences, transcendence of these experiences, and transformation of these experiences into ways to help others that is highlighted above provide a strong example of transformational learning based on a social emancipatory theory. It also demonstrates the transformative impact of self-advocacy on adults with DD.

### **Impacts of self-advocacy on supports**

The impacts of self-advocacy for adults with DD are also felt by family members and other supports. Although research discusses family member involvement and knowledge of self-advocacy groups (Mitchell, 1997), this discussion centers primarily on the role family members play in validating a self-advocate's group membership (Caldwell, 2010). The

impacts on and importance of an advocacy advisor to self-advocates' growth and self-advocacy group development is a second theme in the research regarding the impacts of self-advocacy on supports.

### **Impacts of self-advocacy on family members**

The impacts of self-advocacy for adults with DD on family members remain elusive. Mitchell (1997) noted that the experience of self-advocacy within the family is similar to the transitional process any family experiences when children move through adolescence and into adulthood. While co-researchers from Hackney People First noted that the most difficult thing about continuing to live with family was being allowed to be an adult, these co-researchers were also explicit in their belief that the self-advocacy group was for service issues and that discussions regarding home life should be a private matter (Mitchell, 1997).

In addition to a lack of discussion about family matters during the course of self-advocacy group meetings, information sharing with family members also appears to be limited. Mitchell (1997) found that self-advocacy group members would share the fact that they were a member in a group with family, as well as other general information. However, few specifics about the group were shared with parents (Mitchell, 1997). This suggested that determining the impacts of self-advocacy on family members requires utilizing direct research discussion with family members as opposed to indirect discussion with self-advocacy group participants. Additional research considering family impacts from the point of view of family members would assist in broadening the discussion in this area.

While the impact of self-advocacy on family members may require further investigation, the importance of family to positive self-advocacy experiences for adults with developmental disabilities is evident (Caldwell, 2010). In interviews with self-advocacy leaders, interviewees discussed how, outside of the self-advocacy movement, family influence was also important to their leadership development (Caldwell, 2010). When undergoing a change in self-concept, Beart et al. (2004) noted that an important need of self-advocacy group members was to have changed selves positively validated by others, such as family members. This validation helped group members to maintain their new self-

concepts (Beart et al., 2004). Therefore, one important impact of self-advocacy on family members is the ongoing positive impact they can have on their family member with a DD through encouragement and validation of self-advocacy group membership.

### **Impacts on supports**

The greatest impact of self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities on supports is noted in particular for advocacy advisors. In a study of self-advocacy group formation and the role of the advocacy advisor, Cone (2000) notes that an advocacy advisor is somebody who helps start groups, teaches new group members about rights and responsibilities, teaches group members how to run the group, provides additional training opportunities, and helps arrange transportation for meetings. Competency areas of an effective advocacy advisor include: (a) facilitating group processes, (b) being a skilled trainer, (c) knowledge, belief and commitment to self-advocacy, (d) having access to community resources, (e) knowledge of service and political systems, (f) problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, and (g) developing action plans and grant writing abilities (Cone, 2000). In discussing the change in the role of the advocacy advisor as the self-advocacy group evolves, 27% of advisors stated that, while the initial activities they did focused on offering advice, running meetings and being the leader, this progressed to offering choices, being supportive and generating ideas (Cone, 2000). Thus, one impact of self-advocacy felt by advocacy advisors is the need to evolve along with the skill development of the group members. Gilmartin and Slevin (2009) illuminated this interdependence between self-advocacy group members and facilitators in their study of the effects of self-advocacy group participation.

Perhaps the greatest impact of self-advocacy on advocacy advisors is an increased opportunity to learn how to best support adults with DD. When summarizing the impacts of self-advocacy initiatives in two Albertan communities, Crocker (2005) shares that self-advocates felt the most useful staff support was when staff assisted with planning and organization, assisted with writing letters, and helped to ensure self-advocates understood what was said and that everyone involved in the initiative understood the purpose of the project. The use of the words assist and ensure demonstrate how self-advocates wish to take a

lead role in these activities, with staff providing secondary support as needed. This underscores the theme of person-centered support within self-advocacy while also demonstrating that a large impact on advocacy advisors and support staff is the desire of self-advocates that supports hold back from taking a direct role in activities and emphasize guidance, not direction.

## **Impacts of self-advocacy on communities**

Self-advocacy for adults with DD also has many impacts on various communities. These include the academic community and also boards and the communities they serve (Frawley & Bigby, 2011). Field-based resources and reports also demonstrate that self-advocacy for adults with DD has localized impacts on the communities where projects and initiatives take place (Inclusion BC, 2010).

### **Academic communities and participatory research: impacts**

The impacts of self-advocacy for adults with DD are evident in academic communities through the use of participatory research methods (Gilmartin & Slevin, 2009). One example of participatory research is Traustadottir's (2006) discussion of one person's experience with self-advocacy. Utilizing a collaborative live history approach, the author and participant highlight changes in access to opportunities for self-advocacy during the participant's life in both residential and independent living settings (Traustadottir, 2006). The collaborative life history approach can be helpful in understanding self-advocacy development because telling one's story is in itself an act of speaking up.

In a second example, Gilmartin and Slevin (2009) used a phenomenological approach in their study of the effects of participating in a self-advocacy group on group members; concluding that utilizing this participatory approach, "enabled and enhanced the ability of participants to participate in inclusive research" (p. 158).

In their study of inclusive academic conferences, Frawley, Bigby and Forsyth (2006) found that the degree of attention and effort that was given to inclusion at conferences was dependent upon having a champion that would support the process. Three strategies were noted as helpful in achieving inclusion. One strategy is to have a "consumer"

strand of the program during which accessible papers are delivered to an exclusive audience of consumers with additional time being allotted for questions and discussion (Frawley et al., 2006). A second strategy is to have a consumer/self-advocate day where there are Plain English presentations, exclusive activities, and workshops are run for and by people with developmental disabilities (Frawley et al., 2006). Thirdly, academic conferences may be offered as fully integrated events, with co-presentations and workshops run by local self-advocacy groups (Frawley et al., 2006). Regardless of the strategy used, partnerships between professional organizations and self-advocacy groups to support a joint forum are the authors' recommendation for ensuring success (Frawley et al., 2006). Depending on the strength of the partnership, the potential impacts on researchers, professional and self-advocates as an inclusive community are limitless.

### **Impacts of self-advocacy on boards and their respective communities**

The impacts of self-advocacy can also be seen on boards and the respective communities they represent. In their study of adults with developmental disabilities participating on disability advisory bodies, Frawley and Bigby (2011) found that people with DD hold different political views and that these views influence civic participation. However, the impact of self-advocacy on these advisory bodies was limited, as representatives with developmental disabilities faced the tangible obstacles of long meetings, a failure to translate agendas, minutes and documents into plain English, and being inadequately briefed on issues to be discussed at the meetings (Frawley & Bigby, 2011). These experiences demonstrate how negative or limited impacts can be felt by board members and their respective communities if participation on advisory bodies is token participation, with minimal effort taken to provide a social environment that is collegial and supportive.

Conversely, when effort is made to provide a positive and supportive environment, the impact on board members and respective communities can be great. Through telephone surveys of board representatives with developmental disabilities, family member representatives, and traditional board representatives, Caldwell, Hauss, and Stark (2009) found that study participants felt the outcomes of

committee input can provide a good marker of a committee's value and importance. As one director/representative stated: "Is the advice utilized? . . . I know that for us we've got a number of initiatives going on that we would never have embarked on if it wasn't for this group telling us that this is what they wanted us to pay attention to" (Caldwell et al., 2009: 107). These words demonstrate, when input from self-advocates is valued, the impact of self-advocacy on the board is that new directions are undertaken and new possibilities are explored.

### **Impacts of self-advocacy on communities through local projects and initiatives**

Self-advocacy also has impacts on communities through local projects and awareness initiatives. For example, self-advocates in communities throughout British Columbia organized and implemented projects in their communities as part of the Self-Advocates Seeding Innovation (SASI) project (Inclusion BC, 2010). In one project, a self-advocate mapped his community; interviewing community members about what they do and how they welcome people with disabilities into their establishments (Inclusion BC, 2010). These interviews and map were then turned into a guide book for others with disabilities to use to determine which places in their community are welcoming places to visit (Inclusion BC, 2010). This project represents a tool with potentially large impacts on community members and local business owners – a tool created by a self-advocate.

Another example of a local project undertaken through the SASI initiative is a partnership between a self-advocacy group and other community organizations to organize and host an employer appreciation awards and breakfast (Inclusion BC, 2010). Through this partnership, self-advocates engaged in discussion with business representatives, employment agencies, and community members about employment for adults with disabilities (Inclusion BC, 2010). The impact of this example of self-advocacy for adults with DD on the community is the assurance that self-advocates continue to play an active role in discussion of improved employment outcomes within their community.

The impacts of self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities on communities can also be seen in awareness initiatives or movements. For example, self-advocacy groups in two communities

in Alberta (Canada) created the *Broadening Your Horizons* initiative to demonstrate how individuals could become self-advocates and practice self-advocacy in their communities (Crocker, 2005). The initiative included *Abilities Awareness Week*, with a variety of workshops for business people designed to help them understand how to communicate with people with disabilities (Crocker, 2005). For example, one workshop included one self-advocate explaining how restaurants could improve their menus so that it was easier for people with developmental disabilities to understand them and, by extension, increase the restaurant's business (Crocker, 2005). This initiative had positive impacts on the interactions between self-advocates and fellow community members. As one self-advocate noted, "I was very proud to see that my community has been behind me and the things that I do" (Crocker, 2005: 15). Self-advocates are also impacting online communities. Ward and Meyer (1999) claim that large-scale self-advocacy advanced significantly during the early 1990s due to the increased use of email and other communication technologies. Today, self-advocacy continues to grow its online presence, impacting a greater number of online community members. This is demonstrated in another SASI project, where a website was able to expand its services (Inclusion BC, 2010). Due to the SASI initiative, the self-advocacy website selfadvocatenet.com was able to create an online space for self-advocacy groups to connect, share information and host their own WebPages (Inclusion BC, 2010). The impacts this may have on individual communities is unlimited, as self-advocacy groups throughout the world may find inspiration in the information and postings shared on this website which they can, in turn, use as starting points for initiatives in their own communities.

Social media is also a growing space for today's self-advocacy groups to share their message and impact communities. For example, the London, Ontario based self-advocacy group New Vision Advocates is one example of a self-advocacy group with their own Facebook page. Through this space, the group is able to share information about their mission, their events and services (i.e. presentations), at <http://www.facebook.com/#!/thenewvisionadvocates>. In today's social media age, self-advocacy has gone from being global via email, to social via our online networks. This could have new and exciting impacts via numerous shared online connections worldwide.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Considering self-advocacy from a transformational learning perspective, meaningful impacts arise for adults with developmental disabilities as well as various communities and their members. For adults with developmental disabilities, increased leadership capabilities and the evolution of new self-concepts are powerful examples of the impacts of self-advocacy. For communities, a more prominent voice and personable research within the academic community, increased awareness for some boards and committee members, and the acknowledgement and support of local or online community members are broad examples of the impacts self-advocacy has on us all.

Recognising the importance of self-determination to the exercise of effective self-advocacy must also not be underestimated. Whether viewing self-determination from a social-ecological perspective (Walker et al., 2011) or through the use of causal agency theory (Wehmeyer, 2004), the importance of developing self-awareness and decision-making skills is key strong self-determination and, by extension, effective self-advocacy. As a result of their interdependence, it is important that one does not consider self-determination without considering its future implications for self-advocacy and, conversely, that one does not consider self-advocacy without acknowledging the important qualities of self-determination that serve as prerequisites for budding self-advocates.

The topic of self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities is not without its limitations. In considering the impacts of self-advocacy on family members, information was primarily focused on the validation self-advocates seek from family, with minimal information regarding family members' perspectives (Caldwell, 2010). Detailing these experiences and perspectives may be one area for future research consideration. Deepening our understanding of family members' opinions and experiences may promote the quality of interdependence noted in the social model of disability and further enable the efforts of self-advocates.

In a similar vein, research on the impacts of self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities on support staff centers on the experiences of advocacy advisors (Gilmartin & Slevin, 2009).

Considering Ontario's current context of establishing and maintaining person-centered services within developmental services, additional research regarding the impacts of self-advocacy on all support staff as well as their perspectives on self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities would be both current and helpful for the sector. Future research in this area may consider comparing and contrasting perspectives based on the type of position support staff hold, their length of employment to help develop an understanding of the factors that contribute to or detract from support staff's encouragement of self-advocacy for adults with developmental disabilities. This experience may demonstrate that support staff, in addition to self-advocates, can experience transformational learning and changes in self as a result of their involvement in self-advocacy groups for adults with DD.

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## Connecting in rhizomic spaces: Peer-assisted learning (PAL) and e-learning in teacher education

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*A PAL (Peer-Assisted Learning) project supported research that focused on e-learning and Web 2.0 technologies as part of a pedagogical approach in the context of a tertiary institution. This project responded to a call for a rejuvenation of conventional approaches to pedagogy while teaching an early childhood unit in a large Australian university. In the project a variety of methods, qualitative (interviews and focus groups) and quantitative (on-line survey), were used in order to explore the possibilities involved in learning together in innovative ways. The PAL project is connected here to a 'rhizome' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). A rhizome is a form of network; it is multiple; and, it is capable of producing surprises. This is reflected in the findings that support the use of technology to create an effective collaborative space and also show that there are advantages to destabilising conventional student/lecturer positions. Finally, this narrative account contributes to a growing literature that connects Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) philosophical ideas to education.*

**Keywords:** Peer-assisted learning, early childhood, assessment, Web

## 2.0 technologies, Deleuze, rhizome

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### Introduction and background

This is a narrative account of a research project carried out in a situation familiar to educators in tertiary contexts, namely, delivering a new unit to a large class in a formal lecture/tutorial format. Reflection about the uses of Web 2.0 technology is encouraged (Yamamoto, Kush, Lombard & Hertzog, 2010) and these are included and connect to the philosophical ideas of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) from *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Their work influences education, especially in the field of early childhood education (Olsson, 2009), the area of interest here. The application of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical concepts is a form of "border crossing" according to Dahlberg & Moss (2005: 23). As they point out, a philosopher like Deleuze took little direct interest in early childhood, but as they also say "we need the provocation of different perspectives, viewing a particular field from across borders" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005: 23). The narrative presented here contributes to, and supports, border crossing. We open with a story about teacher educators thrown into a particular and far from unique situation and document the process of turning what might have been disadvantageous into a research project and a successful pedagogical experience. This is an account of a "line of flight enabling one to blow apart strata, cut roots, and make new connections" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 15). A line of flight presents new possibilities but with risks because the line of flight is unpredictable and "the line of flight ... creates or turns into a line of destruction" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 423). A line of flight constitutes a resistance, a desire for something different, a breaking away from the usual norms and expectations.

Our findings challenge the stereotypical thought that the use of Web 2.0 technologies saves time and effort and is a preferred mode of learning. Instead we discovered that the neoliberal dream of students choosing to learn connected only to each other and to various websites is only part of the story. The background and preparatory work is described here as the project was set up carefully to promote a Peer Assisted Learning orientation toward teaching and learning (Edwards & Bone, 2012).

PAL, or peer-assisted learning, is not new and neither is the emphasis on collaboration (Bain, 2004; Boud, 2001; Valli, 1989). A critique could be put forward that peer learning simply reduces face-to-face (f2f) time with lecturers; this was not our intention. We wished to construct a strong and vibrant collaborative space (Mäkitalo-Siegl, Zottmann, Kaplan & Fischer, 2010) and go beyond the usual group work that is often more about forming relationships and ‘getting to know each other’ rather than emphasising the possibility of learning together. We chose to affirm PAL as a way of learning from each other in a context that has been intentionally set up to promote learning through engagement with Web 2.0 technologies (Edwards & Bone, 2012). The project was set up in a way that engages *technography*, an approach that “recognises the significance of technological change to a variety of pedagogical contexts” (Saltmarsh, Sutherland-Smith & Kitto, 2008: 175). This research critically challenged the use of Web.2.0 technologies that value only behaviourist ‘reward’ based approaches to teaching and learning. As an educational leader known to one of the lecturers said recently, “ICT is a classic example [of things staying the same] with interactive whiteboards and those clickers for support, there is more direct teaching with one person out the front controlling the group” (personal communication). In this project we hoped to challenge this perception and to work in a different way.

### ***The beginning***

When describing our work together it sometimes sounds as if we had been colleagues for a long time but that was not the case. At the beginning of the academic year when this research took place we had not taught together. We found ourselves making plans to develop a unit called ‘Assessment in the Early Childhood Curriculum’. This unit would be delivered to 90 adult learners who formed a diverse group in terms of age and ethnicity. Later, at the end of the semester, as we reviewed the events that had taken place, we reflected that the project was “almost mad, as we had completely reconceptualised a teaching and learning approach”. We were concerned to teach new approaches to assessment in line with the requirements of *The Early years learning framework for Australia: Belonging, being and becoming* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). Added to this, one lecturer noted, “We’d never taught before together, we’d barely had a cup of tea together actually because I was overseas.

We'd actually barely met". The often *ad hoc* construction of teaching teams and the requirement to suddenly build a successful working relationship shows in our conversations that reflect the 'rupture' (Reid, 2008: 295) that can open an opportunity for a "line of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 9).

This research could have been constructed on the basis of self-reflection but from the self-study literature we took up the challenge presented by Loughran (2007: 14) to "go beyond the individual alone" and there was a strong focus on teacher and researcher reflexivity in terms of the relationships between ourselves and the students. While planning and delivering this unit and conducting research together, we maintained what Gallagher (2008: 73) calls a "dialogical approach" evident in this narrative. Despite our wish to 'make a difference' like all teachers we found ourselves caught in certain discourses that constrain and construct teaching and teacher education (Reid, 2011). Deleuze and Parnet (2002: 125) note that "a profession is a rigid segment", yet underneath are "the connections, the attractions and repulsions". The spaces we were working in were not ideal but by expressing difference and doubt we could "outmanoeuvre" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002: 143) the limitations and stay in movement, knowing that "it is always on a line of flight that we create, not, indeed, because we imagine that we are dreaming but, on the contrary, because we trace out the real on it" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002: 136).

### **Tracings**

In early childhood education the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) gave an opportunity to work with fresh approaches to assessment in the new unit and to reposition ourselves and our students. There was also space to recognise the "double pincers" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 45) of content and expression and to use this, to take a risk, experiment, and to do some research as part of a larger project. We were designated Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) Fellows within the university and so our exploration was linked to a Peer Assisted Teaching Scheme (PATS) initiative supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALACT).

### ***Segmentarity***

Lecturers or students may continually experience “all kinds of clearly defined segments, in all kinds of directions, which cut us up in all senses, packets of segmentarized lines” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002: 122). There is a familiarity about the lecture theatre and lecture format usually followed by a tutorial that aims to consolidate what had been taught. This is both reassuring and dangerous, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 237) note “the more rigid the segmentarity, the more reassuring it is for us”. We wanted to challenge the usual default positioning of lecturers: front of class, the lone expert, entertainers and transmitters of knowledge. In their turn, students are too often positioned as passive receivers of knowledge. These are familiar positions and of course, there are also certain risks when making changes and in confronting what Penman and Ellis (2009) call the common dilemmas of educators who wish to create change.

Over time it has become apparent that even with the arrival of sophisticated new information technologies that the more things change the more they remain the same and while new tools have been introduced essentially the set up in the tertiary classroom remains the same as ever; tiered seating, facing front to a person or screen. Very often students expect a conventional lecture supplemented by new technologies and these expectations may mirror earlier educational classroom experiences or are influenced by how teaching looks in different cultural contexts. When we teach in Singapore for example, the transmission model is expected and that is how the classroom is set up. This places very few demands on the student in terms of participation apart from the obligation to attend class and take notes. A focus of the project was to encourage peer learning but there remained a possibility that it would be seen as conventional group work. This is often resisted in practice for various reasons and too often all parties retain their positions within rigidly segmented spaces. Sometimes recognising and being frustrated by “heavy constraints” (Gallagher, 2010: 72) in learning environments can support a creative response.

### ***(Re) positioning***

A decision was made to use e-learning and to realise the potential of Web 2.0 technologies (Alexander, 2006). Lecturers often discuss

informally the frustrations of knowing that students who have their heads down in the lecture theatre may not be engaged in deep thought but are more likely to be using technology to text or check out Facebook. The students use these technological tools in ways appropriate to their age and experience as citizens in a technological and fast-changing world. Bruns coined the word 'produsage' to sum up the fact that "the impact of information technology on everyday personal and professional cultural practices can no longer be disputed" (Bruns & Humphreys, 2010: 42). We decided to use this fact pedagogically and to our advantage as well as to the advantage of our students.

### ***Connecting through theory***

The Web 2.0 technologies were used in a way that supported peer support within a collaborative space with a sense of community. Grippa et al (2010: 37) note that this idea matches the theoretical perspective of Vygotsky (1978) who suggests that learning is enhanced "by immersion in social contexts, supporting social interactions and by belonging to communities". The second author of this article favours this theoretical perspective. The first author takes a perspective informed by poststructural theory (Lather, 2007) and related philosophies. From the philosophical (Deleuzian) point of view put forward here this means that learning can be conceptualised as an event (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994), as something untameable and "impossible to predict, plan, supervise or evaluate according to predetermined standards" (Olsson, 2009: 117). The fact that our theoretical perspectives did not always coincide was important in this project as we demonstrated respect for each other's differences and allowed them to work pedagogically for us.

This particular version of events makes use of the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) and from this perspective the Web 2.0 technologies and particularly the internet reflect the image of the rhizome. To be rhizomic is to connect in ways that are "acentered, non-hierarchical, nonsignifying" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 21). It is to be unexpected, a little bit risky, "reversible, modifiable" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 21). To think of the rhizome is to think of a weed or a flower with tangled root systems that exist underground and emerge occasionally and not always in the planned space. The rhizome is difficult to destroy. It is not obvious like a tree, with a main trunk and

branches, this is the model of arborescence that Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 15) critiqued when they said “we’re tired of trees”. The rhizome puts out new shoots and makes new and unexpected connections.

The rhizome is like the internet, the connections are there and so are the surprises; one thing does not necessarily lead to another or the outcome of a search is not predictable. Sometimes when new threads are followed a lot of periphery information comes to light and at other times following a trail may lead nowhere. When we presented the PAL project to the students we shared our wish to make some discoveries together. For once this was genuine as we did not know what we would discover when we planned the unit and were aware that our plans might work or might not. We discussed this with the students and reflected that in all educational contexts there is a teacher discourse that supports certainty and that we do very little that is experimental, more often asking questions that we already know the answer to and constructing predictable activities. The students, as beginning teachers, could relate to this and these discussions closed the distance between us all and began to create a discursive space for shared discoveries. Like all lecturers we had to keep our final evaluation scores in mind but we decided to take some risks anyway. What follows here is a description of what happened as we “moved seamlessly between research and pedagogy” (Gallagher, 2008: 73) and teaching and conducting this inquiry were concurrent activities.

### ***Plateaus***

The various aspects of the project are set out to be read as a series of ‘plateaus’, that is, they all connect but each one represents a particular challenge or activity connected to this inquiry. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 21) rhizomes work and connect through a series of nodes or “plateaus”. These plateaus do not have to be written or read in any kind of order because each plateau is “any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems”. The tangled roots are the PAL project, the use of technology and the early childhood education focus, together with the wish to be innovative in the tertiary education classroom. These interests coincide, intersect and occasionally interrupt each other as shown by the voices of students from focus groups and interviews as well as in our recorded interview

with each other.

### **The research project – a plateau**

The project explored PAL approaches over one semester with one cohort of students but linked with Web 2.0 technology thereby combining a traditional approach with new media (Hine, 2005). Methods of generating data included interviews with each other. Because the power dynamic is a major issue in a project like this where we were teaching the class there was no pressure put upon students to participate. We ran an online survey but it was anonymous and we did not know who participated or not. The online survey contained twelve items on a Likert scale of 1-4 (1 being strongly disagree and 4 being strongly agree). This survey was supplemented by three qualitative questions. Two focus groups of participating students were set up at the end of the project. Ethical permission was granted by the university ethics committee, MUHREC, and students gave informed consent to participate in the research but in a qualitative research project like this the ethical issues are frequently on-going and dilemmas can arise. The idea of research as an ethical process involving “rights, responsibilities and reflexivity” (Bone, 2005: 1) is something that we were always conscious of in this situation.

In terms of research reflexivity a tape-recorded interview between both lecturers took place at the beginning of the project and at the end. These lasted about 45 minutes and were transcribed. More informally, we talked after each lecture and sometimes jotted down notes and ideas about how we were feeling about the project and about what was happening in lectures and tutorials. A Research Assistant transcribed the lecturer interviews and focus group responses. All students were contributing to an e-learning site so samples of their work were available online as part of the unit and the only work we have considered as research data was the work of students who formally consented to participate in the research.

The research was guided by the following intentions:

1. To explore the interface between PAL and e-learning as a site for developing an alternative approach to the more traditional f2f lecture.

2. To determine students' perceptions of the relationship between PAL and e-learning in relation to their perceived acquisition of unit content.
3. To examine students' responses to their participation in the alternative lecture approach compared to their existing perspectives on the role of the traditional lecture in their learning.

We were especially keen to know whether by using ICT we could reposition pedagogical practice with adults in ways that were effective. We view students as active participants in their engagement with interactive technologies (Bruns & Humphries, 2010). The Web 2.0 technologies and students' use of ICT were expected to accentuate the PAL aspects of the research.

### ***Planning for change***

Planning became a way of working with the “and...and...and” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 25) because we did not put any blocks in the way of new ideas. We decided to reverse the usual lecture/tutorial pattern. We opted to run tutorials and then have the lecture. The planning was very upfront for us as everything had to be on the interactive e-learning site well before the session. Students were expected to have engaged with materials (chapters from the textbook, peer-reviewed journal articles, transcripts of interviews with teachers, audio recordings from research projects, video clips, the curriculum documents, internet links) prior to the tutorial. This reversed the usual scheme of things, whereby students could attend a lecture and then survive in a tutorial, because everything has already been introduced to them by the lecturer.

### ***New learning spaces***

Tutorials started with a conversation between the two lecturers in front of the class. This was an improvised and unrehearsed talk connected to the topic for the week. Following this, students in self-selected groups worked on an on-going project whereby each group invented a fictional early childhood setting using ICT. This fictional early childhood setting, together with the technology, advanced what Lin (2010: 12) refers to as an “identity-technology fit”, a process of social construction that

builds professional identity. Week by week this creation took shape and students decided on: a name and logo, a vision statement, the guiding theoretical perspective in that setting; they made curriculum links; and, finally the approach to assessment and examples of assessment (the focus of this unit) were presented and added to the site. The topic of the conversation that started the tutorial linked to key learning outcomes from the EYLF (identity, wellbeing, connected and contributing, communication, involved learners) (DEEWR, 2009). The students then applied their own ideas about how these outcomes might be achieved to their imaginary early childhood setting.

Following the tutorials we went into the lecture theatre. Each week two or three groups of students presented their latest application of learning to the broader group. One week we looked at wellbeing and the student groups, presenting as staff members of their fictional early childhood establishment, described the assessment procedures that they would use to show that wellbeing was a learning outcome supported by certain activities in the early childhood setting. After two or three presentations on the same topic for that week the entire class then critiqued what they had heard and discussed the new ideas that arose from the presentations. As lecturers we became part of the audience and sometimes facilitated the discussion. Again, we often did not agree with each other so the way was open for the whole student group to participate without having to be 'on side' with the lecturers. The work of each group was saved on the e-learning site and could be retrieved under the name of the early childhood setting and so information was available for other groups to look at and share and we all had an overview of all the fictional early childhood settings. This created a new shared learning space and supports the contention of Howard and Ng (2009: 379) that "technology is able to facilitate the sharing and distribution of knowledge and expertise among members within a learning community".

### **The lecture – a plateau**

It was risky not to present a lecture because there is an expectation that the lecture theatre will be where learning happens. Through the changes that were enacted the lecturers became part of the audience in the lecture theatre instead of the performers or main actors. In this

project we retained the lecture theatre as a pedagogical space and it became an exciting space as every week the student groups presented some new and innovative work. This work felt fresh and immediate - not overworked. At first, as the official lecturers, we helped students set up their presentations and supported them as they presented. As the semester progressed the students began to 'own' the space. They went in ahead of us, set up their presentations, introduced themselves and started the session with confidence.

As lecturers we found that student ability to take on the lecturer role and to meet peer expectations was impressive. One of the questions we asked was: would students prefer conventional lectures? The results were encouraging. In response to a qualitative online survey students stated that:

*I feel I understand everything better as we are involved and by 'taking the lecture'... we all learn from each other.*

*Everyone is involved in tutes and lectures, which helps you learn more.*

Another student in the focus group said that she had to get over some fears about public speaking, because:

*You don't want to hide your light under a bushel you want to show everybody what you've done.*

The feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive and encouraged us to continue and complete what we had planned.

### ***Conversations***

The students realised that they were able to join in the conversation between the two lecturers and discovered that when they came prepared they could get involved more easily. As has been made clear, the lecturers do not share a theoretical perspective, have different life experiences and come from different places, so it was unlikely that we would agree or do what is usually expected of lecturers - present a united front. Our conversations were unexpectedly lively. They were spontaneous and students could hear that they were not being

presented with one ‘Truth’ and inadvertently we discovered that we were encouraging critical thinking.

We realised that when behind the bank of controls in the modern lecture theatre that we became ‘the lecturer’ and embodied this role and often presented knowledge and facts as ‘Truth’ or ‘Knowledge’. We discovered that when we were all sitting and talking together that our students contributed very naturally and without any sense of risk when we opened the discussions. It may have helped that we were not in the lecture theatre, in semi darkness, staring at a series of powerpoint slides. It became a more equitable space where stories and experiences could be shared and enjoyed. These open conversations favoured the extrovert student far less and we noticed that in a multicultural and multilingual group of various ages that there was far more willingness to join in. One student said in the focus group that she felt more confident because of the strategies we had put in place, as she said:

*You have to do the work before hand, you can't just slip in underneath and say yeah, I've been to the lectures and I've listened.*

Contributions could also be from what the students really thought as opposed to what they thought their lecturers would like to hear. It was not easy to simply ‘toe the party line’ and agree with the lecturer as we were often disagreeing with each other or presented shifting views. Some students said that listening to us challenged their usual ways of managing their learning and disrupted their usual strategies for being a stereotypically successful student. In the focus groups they were honest about these strategies:

*The other thing is, the other mentality we have as a student is, to be very open and frank, we try to see what that lecturer is expecting from us, and then we try to make and present our assignments for that lecturer in that way. Usually it is just with one person, but because it was with two persons, we are trying really to take a risk.*

*Yes, we put ourselves out there, we didn't say, this is what xxxx would like and this is what yyyy would like. Instead, there are two of them and they are going to have different opinions about it*

*so, I'll just put the whole lot out there, that's it, so you get the real thing. ...this is something very different.*

### **ICT and equity debates – a plateau**

One issue that was debated throughout was the use of ICT both with a range of adult learners and in relation to early childhood settings. Students who were not so familiar with technology in their personal life admitted that these technologies are commonly used in many early childhood settings. All adult learners can be encouraged to go 'pro-am', a term used by Leadbeater & Miller (2004, cited in Bruns & Humphreys, 2010) to illustrate the transition from amateur to highly skilled user of ICT. In early childhood settings this is increasingly a professionally desirable attribute. We noted that some students lived and worked in rural areas of Australia and there were sometimes issues with internet access. Some students had concerns about the cost of laptops and the purchase of the latest technological devices. However, students who did not own a laptop could access computer rooms. The discussion about this was useful because when on practicum in a range of early childhood settings some students became aware that not all families have access to these technologies and to the internet.

We were aware that as Nicholas and Ng (2009: 381) point out "teacher educators blending technology with learning need to implement the pedagogy with care to avoid cognitive overload". Students who were not 'digital natives' (Zevenbergen, 2007) felt that because of the PAL approach that they were supported to learn much more about ICT. One said "my computer skills have improved" and another student felt there was a challenge:

*Maggie, Lisa and I landed together with computer skills almost zero between the three of us, this is a huge learning curve so I just swallowed hard and though okay, I thought I had no idea who these two ladies are, I don't know what their background is, and they didn't know that of me either, and in one sense you start with a clean slate, and that is the workplace too. It's life.*

The words of this student affirm the strength of the PAL approach to learning together. We realised that in terms of peer assisted learning that the student group is not homogenous and does not automatically

form a community of learners. Instead as Bromley (2010, cited in Bruns & Humphreys, 2010: 45) suggests “community is something that is made through participation, not something that is necessarily a pre-given constituency to be discovered”. Equity in the student group and the different skill level of lecturers had to be acknowledged and in this sense the PAL approach built new alliances between learners.

### ***Collaborations***

Everyone was working together and the shared ownership of tutorial and lecture spaces was making this more likely. The fact that students could look at each other’s work supported a sense of sharing, and as students said:

*Susie – cos you had the sharing our services link, did you go into other people’s services and look? (services – the fictional early childhood settings)*

*Student 4 – yes we did*

*Susie– you did?*

*Student 4 – Yes, we thought this is lovely, this is lovely, it was more professional and we learnt from others’ ideas ...we picked up things*

The collaborative potential of using the Web 2.0 technologies was something we felt was affirmed in the research. It has been suggested that Web 2.0 collaborative learning tools:

Encourage discussion, enable easy sharing of documents and information, manage workflow and allow new ideas to emerge. These technologies have the potential to improve individuals’ capabilities to learn from others and increase a sense of personal commitment to knowledge creation. (Grippa et al., 2010: 37)

This statement was supported by evidence obtained in this research project.

### ***Extending the community –the Expo***

Later in the semester we invited family, friends and teachers to an Expo evening where everyone presented posters of their fictional early childhood setting together with the assessment tools they had developed. We were amazed at how many people turned up as this was a non-assessed task and took place after hours. It seemed that, like the rhizome, the sense of a fixed centre had gone and new possibilities emerged. In many units the assignment is an overwhelming focus and this was no longer the case in this unit. As some students in the focus group said in response to (Susie's) query:

*Susie – so you didn't see the peer learning just limited to your group?*

*Students – NO*

Instead of feeling protective or shy about their work the students were proud of it and their confidence was enhanced by the reaction of experienced teachers in the field who were invited to the Expo. These teachers were impressed by the student work and asked for examples and for the students to share resources. Experienced educators made new connections with the university and challenged the assumptions that sometimes exist between academic work (sometimes seen as 'too theoretical') and practice. The Expo was discussed by us, the lecturers, in our final taped interview and we expressed surprise at the commitment of the student group:

*Jane – I realized they really did it because they wanted to they didn't have to work to that level.*

*Susie – no, but I wonder if you made that the assessment...*

*Jane – would it change?*

*Susie – because part of what was beautiful about the evening, was that it wasn't*

*Jane – they turned up because they wanted to, that was really lovely.*

When we interviewed each other as lecturers and researchers we began to talk about the things that had surprised us, the things that we had not planned. In rhizomic terms these can be revealed as “very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 7). The rhizome is connected to desire, to risk, to “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 11) as certainties are destabilised and it became clear that “things never pass where you think, nor along the paths you think” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002: 4). The links with the PAL project are clear. We did engage a line of flight and it cohered in the collective desire of everyone involved in the teaching and learning.

### **Dismantling hierarchies**

On this line of flight we used e-learning and Web 2.0 technologies and began to dismantle the conventional classroom hierarchies. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 211) refer to processes of “segmentarity” that may become “rigid”. It became a possibility throughout the process that despite this rigidity “the face of the father, teacher, colonel, boss, enter into redundancy” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 211). In other words, we displaced ourselves as authority figures, as experts, from the centre and became more flexible and occasionally uncomfortable and a “supple” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002: 124) segmentarity emerged, a segmentarity that can “make detours” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002: 124). After the first tutorial one of the lecturers said that she felt strange as she wandered around because everyone was busy and absorbed in their work with peers. She experimented with leaving the classroom and nothing happened, the students went on working. She had constructed a situation where she was no longer needed. Instead a new pedagogical relationship was being created based on mutual interest rather than the old dependencies that constantly surface in educational contexts.

### **Rhizomic unpredictability**

One of the students in the focus group said that learning in different ways and being challenged had made her work more unpredictable and more interesting. We were relieved that our approach had enhanced her experience in this way. We gathered sufficient evidence to convince ourselves and others that what we had done was effective pedagogically in terms of adult teaching. We even surprised ourselves. In our recorded

interview together we realised that there had been “an extra turn of the wheel”:

*Jane - I had no idea that our conversations would almost set the scene for the unit.*

*Susie – no neither did I... really what fascinated me when they saw us peer teaching as almost modelling how to peer learn*

*Jane– Which we really weren't*

*Susie – we weren't modelling*

*Jane – not consciously*

*Susie – not deliberately, and that's fascinating. Because what they were saying was watching us do the peer teaching provided them with a model for how to learn in groups.*

*Jane – fascinating, I have to say that hadn't occurred to me*

*Susie – no, it hadn't occurred to me at all.*

It must be noted here that we were also surprised by our surprise. Teachers get very used to getting certain outcomes because of careful planning and they carry out the task of teaching in systematic ways. To be surprised, to learn to value the unexpected, and to love what might not be predictable, made teaching the unit an experience we both value. One of the lecturers said as she reviewed the unexpectedness of some of the outcomes of the research in the final interview, “what a journey!”

This seems to highlight an extra dimension of the PAL process and that is, that peer assisted learning when it happens between the people presenting and teaching, gives that approach an added sense of integrity. If the lecturers were so obviously learning from each other as peers then it seemed that so could the students. E-learning was integral to this as the ability to put resources that supported learning on the interactive e-learning site meant that we could then ‘go live’ in the classroom knowing that everything had been put in place. Penman and Ellis (2009: 152) say that a constant dilemma is to teach content and retain “interaction and creativity” and maybe our approach addressed

that challenge, not in a sense of solving a problem, more in that we really worked with what seems to be a perennial quandary. From a Deleuzian perspective this is a positive state as the problem will always be fruitful because it demands attention. According to May (2005: 84), writing about Deleuze, a problem provides an “open field” whereas a solution is “a particular form of exhaustion” (May, 2005: 85).

### ***Enjoyment***

The students spend hours with us so we are aware that this time has to be useful learning time as well as enjoyable time. We especially wanted them to come to lectures and tutorials because we were teaching new content and using the new curriculum framework. We noticed that we finished with similar numbers in the lecture theatre that we started with. This also challenges another supposition, namely that the use of e-learning technologies will mean that people will chose to learn in isolation; that was not our experience. Students stayed in groups and learned most from each other, and also learned to think differently about what could be utilized in terms of learning beyond the walls of the classroom and the relevance of multimedia to increase content knowledge. As they said:

*Student – it opened my mind, cartoons for instance, can be relevant to what we are talking about, little children’s articles, anything*

*Jane – YouTube, anything like that*

The feeling that everything is changing and that resources can be accessed from a variety of places is attractive. One night we created a chat room for the students. Students new to this experience of online chatting were surprised by the impossibility of keeping one thread of conversation going. We discussed this in terms of the internet and the way that learning happens, sometimes not in an orderly way but often by being playful and experimental, by being rhizomic, being prepared to be uprooted so that something new can arise. Consideration of the rhizome itself is to be aware of “a powerful metaphor for change” (Reid, 2008: 295).

## Conclusion

The balance between novelty and the conventional is always edgy in pedagogical terms. Both lecturers had been involved in ‘innovations’ before and were both slightly suspicious of change for the sake of change. Framing what we did within a research project meant that we could go beyond the usual evaluation processes and claim as evidence some of the words of students who participated in the research project.

In relation to the research intention we found that peer-assisted learning can interface with e-learning to create a different dynamic in the classroom or lecture theatre. There were new shoots of learning that surprised us, for example, the idea that the conversations between the lecturers were actually a form of peer learning that demonstrated critical thinking had not occurred to us. Students also felt that the new approach to the lecture increased their active participation. We recognise that every educator will have different concerns and in our account we do not wish to tidy up the loose ends, or provide an ‘answer’, this is in any case, impossible. The rhizome implies “an exercise in creation” (May, 2005: 134), and this work represents a series of overflows and excesses, connections and resistances. We will not know, and teachers rarely know, how this learning will influence the professional lives of our students but their voices and ours, give definition to what happened in this PAL project and affords a glimpse into a different way of working in a collaborative space using Web 2.0 technologies and e-learning. Ultimately we hope that this experience will support students to experiment with assessment and to do things differently themselves as educators of young children.

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## Targeting assessment for developing adult lifelong learners: assessing the ability to commit

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*In this article, I propose that neither traditional assessment nor alternative, competence-based assessment is adequate to meet the challenges of uncertain change. Existentialist assessment that focuses on developing learners' commitment, rather than their competence, may be more decisive in empowering learners who are facing adversity. Existentialist assessment shifts the focus from impersonality, achievement, and universalism to the inclusion of the adult learner's commitment to making meaningful connections between learning and his or her existence (being). These committed meanings are willed and produced by the learner, not only to bring to an end a disturbing situation and uncertainty but also to develop a sense of significance and sustainability when facing uncertainty and processes of change. To ascertain a learner's ability to commit, self-assessment, with its first-person perspective, must be taken into account. Implications include the alignment of assessment with pedagogy that facilitates the adult learner's commitment to connecting his or her existence with the world.*

**Keywords:** adult lifelong learning; assessment; commitment; existentialist; lifelong learning; lifelong learner

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## Introduction

A number of studies (Boud 2000, De La Harpe & Radloff 2000, Falchikov & Boud 2008; Kvale 2007) have recognised the crucial importance of developing adults' lifelong learning abilities or characteristics as a means of ensuring a competitive edge in response to current and future changes. They have highlighted this pressure and the need to develop forms of assessment for the learner's lifelong learning development. Conventional forms of assessment have focused on the target of cognitive learning and knowledge acquisition. However, the attempt to improve conventional, knowledge-based assessment practices has prompted criticism that conventional assessment paradoxically fails to account for the knowledge a learner must acquire to address the variations and complexities of the changing times. Therefore, the discussion of the target of assessment has shifted from focusing on the learner's knowledge acquisition to the learner's establishment of competence (Sitthisak, Gilbert, & Davis 2007). Competence-based assessment involves what one can do or perform rather than simply what one knows and the knowledge that one has accumulated. The development of competence, which highlights the learner's problem solving and completion of tasks in context, seems to be required to ensure effective adaptation to contextual changes in life (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow 1998, Kew 2006) and is therefore identified as the target of lifelong learning assessment (Sitthisak, Gilbert, & Davis 2007).

Compared with the conventional conception of assessment, competence-based assessment, which emphasises the performance, process, and dynamism that require greater agency in managing the world's disordered aspects, seems to be a more effective approach for assessing an adult's lifelong learning development in change. In this article, I propose that despite its value, the alternative, competence-based assessment discourse, remains inadequate to account for the 'lifelong' character of an adult learner. The assessment result of what one can do does not guarantee that one *will* learn on a continuous basis to sustain learning and improvement. This article supplements the current development of assessment through a new lens by suggesting that learners' commitment may be more decisive than their competence for empowering adult learners and sustaining their subjectivities when they face adversity through change and in the future. The existentialist

perspective is presented here to supplement pragmatist, competence-based assessment practices by noting the differences between the practices of competence and commitment.

This article begins by investigating the assessment paradigm from a knowledge-based assessment and moving to a pragmatist assessment. The existentialist position is then considered, and the difference between learning competence and developing commitment is highlighted to provide a more robust account of assessments that help learners who are not only competent in adapting to their environments but are also *committed* to living out and fulfilling their existences and subjectivities during periods of change. Then, based on the framework of developing commitment, self-assessment is proposed as the epistemological frame of reference for considering and developing assessment practices that ascertain a learner's ability to commit. Finally, the implications and challenges of aligning assessment and pedagogy to develop committed lifelong learners are discussed.

### **Conventional and alternative assessment**

The epistemic foundations of conventional, knowledge-based assessment practice generally prioritise *episteme*, which is concerned with adults' cognitive learning and growth. To use Ryle's (1946, 1949) famous distinction, the conventional approach draws upon a person's mastery of knowing-that rather than knowing-how. It belongs to an 'epistemology of possession' (Cook & Brown 1999: 382) that suggests that a person can grasp the reality of the world through an understanding of facts, concepts, assertions, and propositions, as something static that can be stored in the mind of the learner. With the knowing-that position, assessment becomes a practice of targeting learners' abilities in the process of understanding and knowledge development. For the sake of measurability, the tacit, unobservable mentality of knowing-that may be evidenced by the adoption of quantitative, standardised measurements, converting the learner's mentality into test scores, numbers, marks, or grades. There has been criticism of conventional, knowledge-based assessment practices that narrowly define learners' learning abilities and reduce the assessment of lifelong learning to cognition without regard for the operations of the affective, motivational, and behavioural domains (McCombs & Marzano

1990, Garrison 1997) Several studies (e.g., Dochy 2001, Edwards 2000, Gipps 1994, Morrison & Tang Fun Hei 2002, Wiggins 1993) have noted that reliance on the testing and conversion system is inappropriate because this approach evaluates only the lower levels of cognition. Conventional assessment practices, which assume highly prescribed knowledge and develop convergent one-dimensional learning, fail to account for the complexity of learning and insufficiently demonstrate how lifelong learners can apply their agency to meet the challenges of uncertain, rapidly changing futures.

To prepare lifelong learners for their futures, alternative assessment must extend beyond knowledge-based paradigms. Simply assessing one's mastery of facts and propositions (knowing-that) is not sufficient to remain competitive in the complex and uncertain modern world. Instead of focusing on acquiring factual knowledge, a new trend in assessment focuses on the development of knowing-how (Ryle 1946, 1949), or so-called 'holistic competence' (Hyland 1997, Beckett 2008). For Ryle, knowing-how, which is different from knowing-that, is a capacity to perform or act in particular contexts. It is assessed not through anything the learner says or knows but through how the learner acts. Knowing-how presents the learner's competence 'exhibited by deeds, not by internal or external dicta' (Ryle 1946: 8). The theories behind the learning of competence may be based on pragmatist epistemology, which does not equate competence with technical know-how (Elliott 1991). Competence is not developed by applying prior theory or knowledge to action according to procedure but rather serves as a kind of knowing that is inherent in action (Schön 2002). It calls for an 'epistemology of practice' (Schön 2002) that focuses on learning *through doing* rather than learning for understanding. Learning as a process of cultivating competence is opposed to learning as an intellectual process that simply involves cognition. In a number of studies (e.g., Birenbaum 1996, Dochy & Moerkerke 1997, Segers 1999), competence is constituted by or exercised through the cognitive/meta-cognitive, social/behavioural, and affective/motivational domains. The multi-dimensional and non-reductive characteristics of learning are acknowledged in the pragmatist position, which stresses 'the agency of the learner' (Harris 2000: 4) Accordingly, the design of an alternative assessment based on the pragmatist view draws upon learners' active constructive and participative processes to approach new problems and

strategies for tasks (Driessen & Vleuten 2000, Luongo-Orlando 2003). In practice, what is examined is not learners' static possession of the decontextualised knowledge content but rather, for the intentions of problem-solving and task achievement, a dynamic of learners' higher-order thinking and acting processes, such as reasoning, analysing, integrating, communicating, and problem-solving skills (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans 1999, Segers, Dochy, & De Corte 1999, Dysthe 2008). The goal of assessment is to ascertain the learner's competences through the process of demonstrating cognition and action in complex ways, not to measure the learner's acquisition of facts or technical skills.

Although alternative pragmatist assessment practices are increasingly seen as more effective than conventional ones in terms of addressing changes, I propose that alternative assessment practices still fail to address the value and deeper significance of being a lifelong learner. In addition to assessing the learner's knowledge and competence, the importance of considering the expression of the learner's subjectivity and changes to the learner's identity over time is devalued in the development of conventional and pragmatist assessments. Both types of assessments often omit the understanding of the learner's personal and biographical development (Alheit 2009) from the assessment activity. The assessment of lifelong learning should not only measure the mastery of knowledge or the dynamic application of knowledge but also consider the development of authentic, and therefore meaningful, practices of learning and assessment for learners to 'be' with change. By considering the existentialist position, lifelong learning assessment becomes an assessment of *being a lifelong learner*, which is not simply couched in terms of being knowledgeable or competent but in terms of being committed to understanding the world and expressing the adult learner's potential authentic existences that can be created and expanded.

### **Assessment of *being a lifelong learner***

The argument here considers the existentialist notion of assessment by considering lifelong learning as a commitment rather than a competence. Commitment refers to the learner's dedication to learning and development based on his or her feeling of meaningfulness when facing the changing future. For a committed lifelong learner, the object

of learning is not merely 'there' to be understood and applied; the learner sees long term and meaningful connections between the object and his or her existence (being). The committed meanings are *willed* and produced by the learner, not only to bring a disturbing situation and uncertainty to an end but also to develop a sense of significance and sustainability when facing uncertainty and processes of change. A competent learner does not necessarily become a committed, continuous learner when the learner feels a loss of interconnectedness because what is learned loses significance for his or her existence and development.

The assessment of commitment has something in common with assessing one's competence. Both target the assessment of non-reductive, multi-dimensional agency that, in a fuller sense, involves the affective, cognitive, and behavioural facets of the learner's constructive learning process. Competence-based assessment analyses the presentation of cognitive competences, meta-cognitive competences, social competences, and affective dispositions (Birenbaum 1996, Dochy & Moerkerke 1997, Segers 1999), whereas the state of one's commitment is defined through affective, cognitive, and conative components (Arriaga & Agnew 2001). Commitment, like competence, is not assessed through the understanding of theory and knowledge; rather, it is developed and revealed through experiences of thinking, acting, and feeling.

Both assessment processes assume the holism of agency and its situatedness. The competent agent considers a vague and uncertain situation and determines appropriate patterns of problem solving to recover the peace of the surrounding environment. The committed agent must bring his or her whole self (mind, body, heart, and soul) to engage with life situations that allow him or her to make authentic decisions concerning his or her development of the meaning of existence. In assessing the complex nature of learning as competence or commitment, the learner's sensory experiences and feelings, cognition about the senses, and the processed actions of learning are never separate or isolated; they are embedded in situated practices (Wenger 1998). Dividing the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of learner agency or the dismissal of one of these aspects in the assessment practice would constitute reductionism and would assume the division of the mind from the body and of the self from the context.

Despite their similarities of non-reductionism and multi-dimensionality in the components of learning and agency, the crucial point of difference between the assessment of competence and the assessment of commitment stems from their underlying epistemological languages: pragmatist and existentialist. In pragmatic language, the learner is expected to possess the ability to learn and relearn when problems emerge in situations as ‘a contextual whole’ (Dewey 1938: 66). The existentialist position, by contrast, considers the assessment of one’s commitment not as the assessment of how one adapts to ‘a contextual whole’ by solving problems but as the ability to express meanings to create possible selves in change. Being a committed learner is not merely a mobile, mental, and physical existence; rather, it is an intentional existence with purpose that develops learning and life projects. The pragmatist perspective, focusing on the learner’s problem-solving performance to adapt to environmental change, may de-centre subjectivity and attribute more reality to the situated environment than to the learner himself or herself. The learner’s performance is assessed in terms of the whole environment, which turns the learner into an object of the environment. Pragmatist epistemology, in line with conventional epistemology, seeks and gives the primacy of objectivity, truth, and balance in impersonal terms, whereas ‘[t]he framework of commitment leaves no scope for such an endeavour’ (Polanyi 1962: 303).

In this existentialist sense, existence, rather than knowledge or competence, is the starting point for directing one’s learning and becomes the target of assessment. Instead of the preoccupation with how one successfully fits and adapts to never-ending flows of change, existentialist assessment is concerned with the adult learner’s ability to respond to continuous inquiry into his or her identity by searching for who he or she could become, in order to settle down and move forward through life in the face of change over time. The goal of existentialist assessment is not merely, as the pragmatist position suggests, to prepare the learner to problem-solve and perform well during change; existentialist assessment is also concerned with the adult learner’s journey of self-commitment, in which ‘an external thing is given a meaning by being made to form an extension of ourselves’ (Polanyi 1962: 60). The commitment to the extension of oneself is more the extension of an authentic, biographical existence in which one feels

liberated to experience the possibilities of who one might learn to be in life than that of an adaptive, biological existence in which the learner's survival in a larger situation is the main concern. The 'biographical self' (Hewitt 1976) is characterised as the existence of the tangible, substantive individual learner, including all of his or her characteristics – mental, physical, and emotional – who is committed to the continuity of his or her life-span construct. The complex and extended consciousness and commitment provide an elaborate sense of self, that is, an identity that serves as 'a sense of sameness about oneself' (Milrod 2002: 17) and that is sustained even in the face of change.

The state of commitment essentially involves human emotion. As Archer (2000: 83) states, 'we would not say that someone was committed to anything unless they were also emotionally involved'. Affect or emotion is needed as 'the shoving-power to move us (contra-Kant) to devote *ourselves* to our concerns, which are not (contra-Hume) just blind impulses or feelings' (italics in original; Archer 2000: 83). From the existentialist position, the learner is assumed to be 'an experiencing being, self-actuated, rational as well as arational' (Dana & Leech 1974: 429). Whereas thought selects possible actions, affect drives the learner in one direction rather than another among possible actions, providing the learner's subjectivity 'with its singular content' (Deleuze 2001: 104). From this perspective, assessment of the learner's feelings about the learning process and meaning may be more decisive and have a greater impact, in terms of the intention to persist, than assessment of the learner's mastery and application of knowledge and skills. The pragmatist assessment, which focuses on the learner's abilities of thought, action, and affect for problem solving, does not necessarily stress attachment to the learner's feelings of being valuable and meaningful. With a focus on affective attachment, the development of existentialist assessment that stresses the capacity for continuous attached commitment during change contributes to lifelong learning as 'learning dispositions' (Carr & Claxton 2002) and as a 'habit of being' (Yorks & Kasl 2002). *Being a learner* is primarily involved with feeling and experiencing oneself as an active agent in shaping *who* one could become rather than simply pursuing a cognitive activity or the transient interaction between the learner and his or her environment based on *how* the learner performs. Assessing one's ability to commit includes the understanding of one's sense of belonging and a sense of willingness

to stay in a space that involves developing long-term relationships with others despite the prospect of change and uncertainty. Without affect, the learner stops being attached to his or her learning object, which becomes irrelevant or pointless when it is considered separately from the learner.

## **Self-assessment**

How might an assessment for developing committed lifelong learners look? To ensure the effectiveness of one's learning throughout life and on one's own, several scholars have powerfully stated that if individuals become lifelong learners, these learners must concurrently become assessors of their learning (Boud 2000, 2004, Broadfoot & Black 2004, Jegede 2005, Boud & Falchikov 2006). Through self-assessment, learners are empowered to take ownership of their learning experiences and development. The assumption of the individual learner's responsibility for improvements in and judgment of his or her own learning ensures that the process of assessment develops not as a practice performed or imposed on learners but as a practice that ensures the primacy of the learner's perspective, allowing learners to 'take on the authority to assess themselves' (Brew 1999: 169).

The primacy of self-assessment reflects an acknowledgment of a non-absolutist form of assessment that changes from prioritising third-person perspectives to highlighting first-person perspectives through personal narratives, portfolios, or biographies. The primacy of the first-person perspective 'liberates learners to experience the possibilities of what they might be' instead of 'the enframement of the world proposed by the assessor' (Gibbs 2011: 23). The adult learner comes to the science course, for instance, and listens to the teacher's lecture. With the primacy of the first-person perspective, the learner is expected not to simply absorb the main points of the lecture and the scientific material provided but to induce feeling, thought, and possible action related to the lecture and material (the third-person perspective). What matters is how the learner develops his or her accounts of science and the learner's own reflection on how science learning can contribute to his or her possible existence and growth in change. If the learner considers or accommodates the third-person perspective and assessment, the existentialist learner does so not because he or she is subject to authority

but because, instead of dismissing the external perspectives as a nuisance, the learner perceives them as an opportunity. Any imposition of the third-person perspective potentially leads to inauthentic interpretations of the learner's learning and existence. Self-assessment with a focus on the first-person perspective not only represents the learner's role as a participant in assessment but also demonstrates the primacy of learners' perceptions, 'a reversal of the common assessment practices promoted by accrediting agencies' (Strawser 2009: 4).

Self-assessment that targets learners' commitment involves 'knowing, acting and being' (Dall'Alba & Barnacle 2007) and a process of the 'formative relations between being and acting, between who we are and how we act' (Van Manen 2007: 13). To ascertain a learner's ability to commit, the focus of self-assessment is less of a self-monitoring process of one's academic, theoretical understanding or one's effective, practical performance and more of a self-reflective process of learning knowledge and actions that may shape the learner's 'own most distinctive possibility' (Heidegger 1978: 435). For the direct evaluation of a learner's commitment to shaping his or her 'own most distinctive possibility', the learner's self-assessment must not only consider immediate learning outcomes but also reflect on how the meanings of present outcomes can be grasped in the long-term, on-going project of developing the learner's being—the learner's own particular form of existence when facing change. In contrast to conventional assessment, which usually asks the learner 'to think about what has been done in the past' (Bailey 1978: 66), self-assessment draws upon the learner's thinking about the future and the unknown, considering the extent to which the learner engages with learning according to personal goals and values and integrates present learning outcomes to his or her long-term, future-oriented vision. Tan (2007) identifies teacher-driven, programme-driven, and future-driven self-assessment and states that only future-driven self-assessment establishes and sustains students' self-learning and self-assessing capacity independently of other significant individuals (e.g., instructors).

Instead of mainly asking learners 'to select or write the correct response' (Wiggins 1990: 1) and narrowing the practice of assessment to quantification and descriptivism, as conventional assessment may suggest, the practice of self-assessment asks learners to make sense of

their learning by considering the contributions their present studies can make to their life in change. Such an assessment is approached not as evidence of the acquisition of new facts, knowledge, or skills 'reported in the form of quantitative scores which are used to rank learner performance' (McDowell 1998: 335) but as a method of reflecting upon their learning experiences through a qualitative process of narratives and stories (Clandinin & Connelly 1998) in forms such as learning logs, stories, biographies, self-reports, and portfolios. First-person narrative accounts of learning experiences serve as rich resources that reveal the overall meaning of learning outcomes and processes, including self-visions and self-purposes. The self that is developed in self-assessment, accordingly, can be understood as what Archer (2000) terms 'the sense of self', which *senses* the authentic and appropriate associations of the self with the world at a non-linguistic, pre-conceptual level. This self may also be what Gallagher (2000) calls the 'narrative self', the self that can be 'extended in time to include memories of the past and intentions toward the future', which enables the continuity of personal identity across time. By bringing one's whole self (mind, body, soul) (Rogers 1997) to learning and assessment, self-assessment practice is never merely a dynamic process or movement in response to change but becomes a dwelling, (auto-) biographical project in which the learner reflects on and interprets how his or her learning affects his or her decisions about finding deeper meaning, connection, and satisfaction and how it suggests a future. Self-assessment becomes a self-discovery process by reflecting upon how learning affects the learner 'personally, touches his [or her] personal truth' (Sollway & Brooks 2004: 51).

However, assessment practices with the primacy of feeling one's 'personal truth' should not be considered completely introspective or subjective. It would be absurd to suppose that such self-reflections and choices in self-assessment could arise independently of social criteria or rubrics of assessment that have been pre-validated by external assessment standards. Distinctions between the personal and the social, the human and non-human, 'are taken to be network effects' (Fenwick & Edwards 2010: 3) as the personal and the social inherently associate with and require each other. The learner's reflections influence and are influenced by social expectations and make one's reflections possible rather than restricting one's reflections. As Boud (2000: 169) notes, '[a] necessary part of taking responsibility for one's own assessment

is that ability to identify what standards should appropriately apply'. Self-assessment involves embracing the feedback and appraisal of other significant individuals (e.g. instructors and peers) who serve as reference groups. The learner may find that the reference groups' judgment of his or her learning conflicts with his or her own reflections. An authentic lifelong learner acknowledges the contradicting elements rather than ignoring them and approaches them by understanding and being open to them in a spirit of integrity. The judgment and feedback from other significant individuals or pre-validated, accredited assessment agencies is acknowledged and is a necessary aspect of understanding. However, the authenticity and continuity of one's assessment of his or her own commitment to learning and developing meaning is irreducible to third-person accounts. It is not only a matter of what others consider appropriate in one's lifelong learning and meaning development, it is also a matter of what the learner cares about and his or her own reflections of how he or she, by engaging with learning, comes into meaningful connections with change for the future. The practice of self-assessment, which calls us to think about and value our form of existence in living with change, is a process of tacit self-knowledge (Polanyi 1962) that is inaccessible and incommunicable to observers and assessors. It can only be interpreted by the learner himself or herself with reference to his or her own motives, intentions, and purposes in directing his or her learning to find a 'place' in change. Efforts to enact authentic self-assessment require an insistence on rejecting self-assessment as the fulfilment of an obligation to achieve what is expected of learners by subjecting self-assessment to larger assessment systems that are bureaucratic and rule governed. Drawing solely on external feedback and judgment undermines the integrity of the learner's development.

## **Conclusion and implications**

This article argues for the use of assessment methods that support the development of lifelong learners who live within the context of change. The human, existential version of assessment is more than simply an assessment of the development of knowledgeable or competent learners. The meaning of knowledge for adult learners' existence, not the knowledge itself or its application, constitutes and captures the being of a lifelong learner in a state of flux. The significance of lifelong

learning beyond the use of traditional testing practices or performance-focused practices has not been adequately highlighted in the relevant literature and policies, which reflects a reduced conception of being a lifelong learner. Nonetheless, because being a lifelong learner implies and enables the learner to have possibilities to 'be' and 'become' during future times of change, the development of assessment is inseparably linked to a sustainable and desirable version in which the focus moves from the assessment of competence toward the assessment of commitment to existence and meaning. In this perspective, assessment is not simply a matter of assessing how much knowledge one has or how proficient one is in solving problems; it is a matter of making meaning through one's continuous commitment to seeking and expanding one's possibility for existence, which is kept open in the future. The development of commitment results from one's cognition, feelings, and implemented actions rather than one's recall of facts or performance according to social constructs. When learning results are assessed, the learner's affective, behavioural, and cognitive processes, which produce interwoven results, should be routinely assessed and observed as well.

To make developing and assessing one's commitment the focus of assessment does not suggest the rejection of knowledge-based or competence-based assessment methodologies. Assessing commitment does not replace the need to assess abilities of knowledge production or competency building, both of which undeniably play a role in the development of lifelong learning. Whereas assessment in terms of grades or performance results is of some interest, it is also important to develop and examine lifelong learners' needs to transcend their interest in knowledge acquisition and competence building and to additionally assess their personal commitment to finding connections of meaning in an uncertain world to anchor one's sense of belonging and provide certainty on an on-going, sustainable basis. Pushkin (1999: 458) notes that, when teaching and assessing his students' writing of chemical formulas, 'I do not want my students to learn writing chemical formulas for the sake of it' but to think for themselves, reflecting on 'how science might be part of their future'. Du Plooy (2007) explores the value of adult learners' self-assessment and self-reflection reports at the University of South Africa and states the importance of providing students with opportunities to assess their personal knowledge, feelings, and experience.

The proposal for developing assessments for lifelong learners has implications for the alignment of learning, pedagogy, and assessment (Biggs 1996). One of the challenges for pedagogical development is the shift from developing the learner's cognition to the facilitation of the learner's self-directed cognition, affect, and action. Conventional pedagogical methods that stress cognitive development and alternative pedagogical methods that emphasise competent action will fail to foster lifelong learning development on a sustainable basis if the learner's affective involvement is not considered. To remain relevant and keep learners motivated, pedagogical practices must address and understand the affective needs of learners, which fosters self-direction and strong commitment. A shift in emphasis towards affect, thought, and action concurrently requires course or programme providers to nurture learners by offering interesting and challenging tasks that let them commit not merely to lecturing but to facilitating rather than guiding. To this end, assessment tasks require the development of learners' interest in connecting their learning with the future and with life-world contexts rather than simply with present courses or programmes. However, drawing attention to the need to design and implement pedagogy and assessment processes that encourage future-oriented and real-context learning while including discipline-based delivery is a challenge. The course or programme provider who is determined to develop lifelong learners and to target the learner's ability to commit cannot do so without undertaking a committed journey similar to that of the learners. The alignment with the future and life-world contexts to which the learner's affect, thought, and action are committed and applied should be made explicit (Boud 2007). In designing assessment tasks, this article suggests that the learner's opportunities for self-assessment must be considered. The learner's self-assessment and the third-person assessment are not in contrast or mutually exclusive. The learner's self-assessment, which serves to achieve a balanced and genuine picture of the learner's own learning development, must take into account the external perceptions or feedback of any other relevant and significant individuals. To develop committed lifelong learners, the outcome of assessment must be a complex blend of assessing adult learners' rational reasons, passions, and actions and adult learners' ultimate concerns to discover who they are in terms of their life meanings and development through change.

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## **The quest for authenticity: A study of an online discussion forum and the needs of adult learners**

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*The objective of achieving a sense of 'authenticity' in an educational context is one that might have immediate appeal, though how this is defined, let alone achieved, remains contested. The concept of 'authentic discussion' has traditionally been used in the context of classroom English teaching in schools, but this paper explores its possible application to an online discussion forum at university. Participants in this forum were students in a program designed to prepare adult learners for higher education. Though communication in an online environment differs from face-to-face dialogue, it was found not to be a barrier to 'authenticity' in some respects. Multiple perspectives were evident with students building on the ideas of each other, but also being prepared to disagree. The level of support and respect was such that they were willing to tackle sensitive issues, and share in an honest and sometimes revealing way. The role of the lecturer emerged as a critical component in achieving such outcomes. Though claims of 'authenticity' are always difficult to substantiate, this study concludes that elements of an 'authentic discussion' can be achieved in an online environment*

*and this objective has a particular salience in the context of adult learning.*

**Keywords:** *authentic discussion; adult learning; online learning; critical thinking; enabling education*

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## **Introduction**

The notion of ‘authenticity’ in an educational context has been applied in a variety of ways but the implication is generally that this kind of learning is more meaningful and incisive, that somehow the learning outcomes have more real-life significance, in comparison to more traditional learning experiences. The literature about ‘authentic discussion’ has focussed almost exclusively on the context of classroom English teaching. The focus of this study is to establish the ways in which the characteristics of an ‘authentic discussion’ might apply to adults, rather than school-age children, and to an online environment, rather than a classroom context. The paper begins with an exploration of the concept of ‘authenticity’ and its connections to the principles of adult learning. According to the interpretation of Hadjioannou (2007), the concept of ‘authentic discussion’ is an exchange where multiple viewpoints are openly expressed in a way that leads to new understandings and co-constructed forms of knowledge. A study of a discussion forum on the topic of ‘family’ is used to illustrate to the possibilities for authentic discussion in the online environment. The participants in this forum were students enrolled in an enabling program, that is, one designed to prepare adult learners for higher education. The study revealed a number of features that correlate with those of an ‘authentic discussion’, including an acceptance of multiple perspectives, a climate of respect and support, and a preparedness to take risks. These findings are then discussed in terms of their likely implications for educators of adult learners and opportunities for future research in online learning.

## **Authenticity and the needs of adult learners**

The concept of ‘authenticity’ has recently emerged in a number of contexts in the field of education. According to Reeves, Herrington and Oliver (2002), an interest in “authentic activities” requires more

work than the development of more traditional forms of content-based instruction, but can result in improved learning outcomes. Newmann and Wehlage (1993) describe authentic instruction as “significant and meaningful”, as opposed to “trivial and useless”. They advocate that students have the opportunity to experience learning tasks with real-world connections. In a similar vein, Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson and Soler (2000) talk about authenticity in terms of literacy activities that have real-world connections, while Herrington and Oliver (2000: 23) advocate “authentic learning environments” that close the gap between “formal school learning and real-life learning”. “Authentic tasks” are associated with high levels of engagement and positive learning outcomes (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). “Authentic assessment” encourages a more proactive approach to learning and is designed to equip students with skills needed for their future rather than for simply passing subjects to gain a qualification (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004). Clearly, the concept of authenticity is a seductive one in educational terms; it denotes the possibility of meaningful, challenging and proactive learning experiences, as opposed to learning which is shallow and passive. There is the implication that such learning experiences will have relevance to real-world situations and can benefit the individual in their ‘real’ life and not just the context of a formal education.

In view of these connotations, the concept of authenticity might seem to have direct relevance to the needs of adult learners. In Knowles’s andragogical model (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998), one of the most widely used models of adult learning, there are a number of defining characteristics that resonate with the idea of ‘authenticity’. According to this model, adults are perceived to be more genuine in their levels of autonomy: they are more self-directing in nature, and more likely to feel responsible for their own learning. Equally, their motivation may be described as more ‘authentic’ in that they tend to be intrinsically motivated, and therefore prefer to be given a sense of choice in their learning. The desire for authenticity may also be observed in their need to feel that the prior experience and knowledge they bring to the learning environment are recognised and valued. Further, adults become ready to learn when life circumstances lead them to this point, and they need to see that knowledge and skills have immediate application and relevance to a real-life context.

Although the andragogical model has been criticised for its lack of consideration to how the learner is socially and historically situated (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Pratt, 1993), there is much research in this field that also draws on social constructivist principles and stresses the significance of social conditions in adult learning. According to Pratt (1993: 19), “andragogical approaches require a psychological climate of mutual respect, collaboration, trust, support, openness, authenticity, pleasure, and humane treatment”. The teacher’s role becomes one of facilitator, rather than authority and control. Apart from the all-important relationship between teacher and student, an atmosphere of mutual respect amongst all participants is widely advocated. Thus, learning is construed as a social activity, and adult learners, like school-age learners, are believed to learn best when they work collaboratively with others in a supportive environment. Wang, Sierra and Folger (2003) argue that maintaining a sense of community, by encouraging collaborative forms of learning, is an essential part of achieving positive learning outcomes for adult learners. With much university study being offered online in recent years, considerable attention is now given to how online activities can allow for maximum student participation and social interaction (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Rovai, 2002). Communication tools such as online discussion boards have served a pivotal function in this transition (Skinner & Derounian, 2008).

### **The needs of STEPS students**

The principles of adult learning, including the need for a positive, supportive learning environment, underpin many aspects of Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS), an enabling program, which has been operating since 1986 at CQUniversity in Queensland, Australia. The program, which can be taken full-time or part-time, aims to provide adult learners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for success at university. At the time when this study was undertaken, students completed subjects in the following four areas: academic writing, mathematics, computing, and general study skills. Many STEPS students have experienced disadvantage—whether it be a low socio-economic background, difficult personal circumstances, and/or negative experiences of formal education—and will be the first from their immediate families to study at university. Therefore, considerable attention is given to ensuring that tasks are appropriately scaffolded and

that adequate amounts of teacher support are provided, but with the overarching aim that students develop self-confidence and autonomy. Much of the STEPS philosophy reflects a holistic approach which acknowledges the social and emotional needs of students, as well as their academic needs. Therefore, when the STEPS program was offered in distance mode in 2006, considerable attention was given to the ways in which a supportive community and positive learning environment could be established in order to ensure that the STEPS ethos would not be compromised (Danaher, McDougall, Sturgess & Todorovic, 2008). Online discussions were considered an important vehicle for distance students to support each other and share their ideas.

### **The concept of 'authentic discussion'**

In order to establish the authenticity or otherwise of discussion in such online forums, it is firstly necessary to define what is meant by this concept. Though there are likely to be widely ranging interpretations of 'authentic discussion', the concept seems to have direct links to the principles of constructivism, whereby the individual's engagement with new ideas is based on their prior knowledge and beliefs, rather than the result of transmitting knowledge from one to another (Richardson, 2005). Arising from such a learner-centred view of education, the objective of ensuring 'authenticity' in discussion has traditionally been used in the context of English teaching in schools, and, in particular, to the discussion of literary texts. McCann (2003) refers to meaningful and analytical discussion about literature as being symptomatic of 'authentic discussion', while Johannessen (2003) emphasises the importance of engaging students in discussion that requires critical thinking and analysis. Calfee, Dunlap and Wat (1994: 546) propose that authentic academic discussions should be characterised by metadiscourse, or "talk about talk". According to Briggs and Tang (2003), teaching contexts are responsible for the deep or superficial learning that arises from class discussions. Teachers can create messages that enhance deep learning by operating on a basis of freedom and choice. It is a matter of "balancing trust, risk and value" (Briggs & Tang, 2003: 65). The more autonomy students are given in discussions, the bigger the risks, but the greater the chance of authentic dialogue.

For the purposes of this paper, the concept of 'authentic discussion' is

framed by Hadjioannou (2007: 370) who defined such communication as a “dialogically oriented classroom interactions where participants present and consider multiple perspectives and often use others’ input in constructing their contributions”. Because it is a speech genre that operates within a particular community, it seems useful to study the characteristics of that environment in order to understand how patterns of dialogue evolve (Hadjioannou, 2007: 370). Though Hadjioannou (2007) concedes there is no easy way of describing a discourse community, she has identified a number of norms that characterise a particular social group engaging in authentic discussion. First and foremost, in order to be considered ‘authentic’, it is essential that understandings are co-constructed rather than simply transmitted from one person to another. Participants in the discussion listen attentively to others and build on the ideas offered by each other. Therefore, the scholarly authority of the teacher is not pivotal to learning. Rather than the teacher steering the discussion towards a pre-determined outcome, there is an emergence of new and/or multiple understandings based on shared viewpoints. Along with a more equal relationship between teacher and student, a more proactive style of learning is implied. Hadjioannou (2007) claims that a classroom that encourages such discussion is one in which all class members are invited to participate. Students raise issues they are interested in, rather than relying on the teacher to initiate topics for discussion. They are also able to make connections between classroom learning and out-of-classroom experiences, often relating the curriculum context to their personal lives.

‘Authentic discussions’ are characterised by positive social interaction whereby participants acknowledge the contributions of others, complimenting others on their contributions, and assisting others to clarify their ideas. Such consideration may be considered necessary in view of the potentially “socially perilous” nature of the opinions expressed (Hadjioannou, 2007: 393). It seems that students are more likely to initiate topics, share real-life experiences, or challenge each other if they are working in an atmosphere of trust. The participant may otherwise be considered vulnerable because of the more contentious nature of views expressed. The use of positive humour also assists in providing this climate of mutual respect. Humour that is relevant, respectful and well-meaning can help to “build and maintain a sense of community and probably [play] an important role in rendering

the classroom environment a safe place for authentic discussion” (Hadjioannou, 2007: 393).

In her study of fifth graders in Florida, Hadjioannou (2007) was careful to avoid claims of generalisability, though she did express a hope that her findings might be adopted by others. Certainly, in the list of norms that she identifies, a starting point for comparison presents itself. If opportunities to engage in authentic discussion lead to deeper understandings of topics and a sense of autonomy, as argued by Hadjioannou (2007) and others, then perhaps this kind of activity is something from which adult learners can also benefit, particularly in light of the perception that mature-aged learners are more self-directed than their younger counterparts. These considerations also have potential application to online teaching and learning environments. Therefore, the research question posed by this paper is: How might the concept of ‘authentic discussion’ be applied to a group of adult learners in the context of an online discussion forum at university?

### ***The research at hand***

This article reports on a larger study, the purpose of which was to explore the role of online discussion forums in the learning journey of distance students enrolled in STEPS, a program designed to prepare mature-aged learners for higher education. The data comprised of postings at the online discussion forums used in each of their four courses. The learning management system Blackboard provided asynchronous discussion boards that allowed students to post and read messages, as well as to respond to any student or teacher involved in the target course. Participation in these online discussions was encouraged but not mandatory. No additional activity was requested of the participants in this study, beyond giving permission for their discussion forum postings to be analysed. Students were given assurances that they would not be identified in any way and that their participation would not affect their overall grades, as the study would take place after these had been finalised. Of the 285 students enrolled, 50 gave their permission.

For the purposes of this paper, a particular discussion board within the Language and Learning subject will be analysed. Being a subject that introduced students to the conventions of academic writing and research, there was considerable emphasis on critical thinking and

discussion. Students were asked to reflect on their personal learning journey, and to consider how they make meaning of their world.

Participation in discussion was encouraged, whether face-to-face or online, on the assumption that “the best learning often occurs when we share experiences, ideas and feelings” (CQUniversity, 2009). As a stimulus for thinking, writing and discussing, students were introduced to a range of contemporary topics. One of these was the changing nature of family and family values in Australian society today. Students read newspaper and magazine articles, and also studied models of academic writing on this topic. They were then invited to participate in an online discussion on the topic of “family”, based on their reactions to their readings and activities in this module.

There was a total of 304 postings to the “family” forum, some of these being multiple postings by the same students. Over 100 of these were posted by the lecturer in charge of the course (Helen). Of the 113 students who posted, 37 of these gave permission for their messages to be used for the purposes of this study. At the end of the term, the texts from these postings were extracted, verbatim, from the discussion board and encoded to remove identifying information. Pseudonyms were used to protect students’ anonymity. When choosing quotes to illustrate the key points in this paper, there was consideration given to ensuring both male and female voices were represented, but the emphasis was on foregrounding the range of perspectives and backgrounds represented rather than demographic differences.

In accordance with the tenets of qualitative research, an organisational structure was constructed in order to explain the event under study (LeCompte, 2000). Rather than simply generating themes from the data, a theoretical lens was used to guide the analysis, in this case, the facets of ‘authentic discussion’ outlined by Hadjioannou (2007). In order to find common themes, the texts were coded using the analytical tool, NVivo. The processes of filing, cataloguing, labelling and tabling of data that characterise a qualitative method (LeCompte, 2000) are facilitated by use of this electronic tool. The initial coding resulted in several code categories: ‘real-world connections’, ‘rapport’, ‘personal experiences’, ‘self-awareness’, ‘student initiative’, ‘risk-taking’, ‘student advice’, ‘disagreement’, ‘critique’ and ‘building on ideas of others’. Using a form of thematic analysis, the original list of descriptive codes were

reworked and refined to generate fewer, broader themes. According to Boyatzis (1998: 4) a theme is “a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon”. Therefore, using this process enabled me to not only organise the data, but to make sense of and interpret the findings. Part of this analysis involved establishing the relationship between the themes, thus enabling me to understand the phenomenon under study: the characteristics of this discussion forum that reflect aspects of an authentic discussion. To this end, three broad, inter-related themes emerged, each directly related to the original concept of authentic discussion: ‘acceptance of multiple perspectives’; ‘climate of respect and support’; and ‘preparedness to take risks’.

### ***Acceptance of multiple perspectives***

According to the literature, a discussion is considered more ‘authentic’ when participants demonstrate that they are really listening to each other and that they can appreciate the viewpoints of others. In reviewing the online postings at the discussion forum about “family”, it became clear that a number of students were very interested in what others had to say, and acknowledged these perspectives before offering their own thoughts on the topic. Here is just one example of how a student demonstrates this kind of ‘attentive listening’:

*Ellen: I agree with you Peter, we do have more choices these days, the choice to raise children in a healthy, loving environment. Thirty-five years ago I can remember as a small child that I begged my Mother to leave my Father, but it just wasn't the done thing. So we all just had to wear the abuse and violence and there was no such thing as counselling for the trauma back then, in fact it was all hidden behind closed doors... I would also like to point out that women also can be violent and abusive to not only their children but also to their partners. This is just as traumatising, I don't want people to think I am against men just because of my experiences, because we all know it goes both ways.*

In this response, Ellen empathises with Peter and the point he makes about having more choices in terms of raising a family. She also adds another layer to this discussion by gently pointing out that it is not just men who can be violent in relationships. This was typical of a number of

responses in which students initiated their own ideas, but in reaction to what others had said. In this way, the students built on the ideas of each other, thus becoming co-constructors of knowledge in a way that reflects the kind of authentic discussion described by Hadjioannou (2007).

It was also pleasing to note the way in which some students could acknowledge that there was more than one way to view an issue. In a forum examining “family”, it is safe to assume that students would hold widely ranging views of what this means, and how this institution might have evolved. You could expect that this was a sensitive issue for some students and that it might be difficult to see things from a different perspective. One student clearly articulated her appreciation for the contrast between her upbringing and that of others in the group:

*Caroline: Hi Justin, I enjoyed reading your story. I can't believe how many threads I am reading from [students] from broken families. It is quite humbling (if that's the right word?) I am blessed as I have come from a very 'intact' background. You are right, 'Home is where the Heart is' and don't forget you can't choose your (biological) family but you can choose your friends and make them your family just as you have done!*

This kind of critical, analytical thinking echoed the broader aims of the Language and Learning subject. In this subject, students were asked to reflect on their own values and were challenged to appreciate that there is more than one way to view any given issue or topic, via frameworks for thinking such as de Bono's Six Thinking Hats (1985). Such engagement was actively encouraged by Helen, the lecturer who monitored this discussion forum:

*Hi Toni, and Philippa  
I enjoyed the thread of this discussion very much. Some great points and lots of thinking from multiple perspectives – all very necessary when we start writing academic essays.  
Thanks for your comments.  
Helen*

As alluded to in Helen's comments, the ability to see things from different perspectives was considered an important aspect of academic thinking and writing. In such exchanges the teacher can be more of a

facilitator of learning rather than the ‘expert’.

In some cases, students openly disagreed with each other, though this was generally done in a respectful manner. In the following exchange, two students challenge the ideas of each other before another student draws their two positions together in a more ‘middle-ground’ response.

*Rita: Jessie I would have to disagree with you on that one. Having grown up in a family where my mother stayed with my father for us children. It was a very difficult time for 18 years of my life and was a relief when they finally did get a divorce ... Don't get me wrong I think we should all work at trying to keep the family unit together but it won't work if it's only for the children.*

*Jennie: I think you have missed my point Rita. Obviously if the relationship is not a happy one, it would do more harm than good to the children involved to stay together. Many people give up when the going gets tough, and to have a successful relationship and family life, you need to work at it. I believe if people take the time and make the effort to work things through when they go wrong, there would be less broken families in the world. This does not apply to ALL people or situations, just some.*

*Lena: Jennie and Rita,  
I can relate to what you are both saying. Things aren't always black and white and circumstances change. Speaking from personal experience.  
Regards Lena.*

It is interesting to note how meaning is co-constructed, with the first two students openly disagreeing and the third demonstrating empathy with both positions, being able to see the merit in what each has to say. Clearly, the issue of divorce and ‘staying together for the sake of the children’ is what Hadjioannou (2007: 393) might describe as a “socially perilous” topic. In view of the emotive nature of such a discussion, and the close personal significance for many of these students, the tone of this thread may be viewed as passionate at times, yet remained ‘civil’, even though students are coming at this with contrasting perspectives. Their preparedness to disagree openly with each other indicates their level of comfort in the collaborative space. Being free to pursue this

conversation without interjection or ‘correction’ from the lecturer would also seem to afford them a measure of autonomy.

### ***Climate of respect and support***

The positive way in which students acknowledged the contributions of others may be said to contribute to a respectful and supportive climate. Hadjioannou (2007) suggests that this spirit of cooperation and collaboration is a feature of environments that foster authentic discussion. Students commonly began their postings with “I agree . . .” and used the name of the person to whom their comment was directed. In some cases they built on what the other had said; in others, they clarified their own position in terms of what the other person had contributed. Students seem to be really ‘listening’ to each other, rather than simply presenting their own ideas, and in this way, their conversations seemed more natural, more ‘authentic’.

In some cases, students were able to openly express empathy for each other, as demonstrated in the following response:

Danny: *Hi Mick  
I feel for what you went through I find it amazing how people  
forget the marriage vows as soon as they are said and you may  
kiss the bride can be then followed by so much hurt and suffering.*

The student here is respectful and compassionate towards Mick, who had presumably shared a story about his marriage breakdown. A similar style of communication was demonstrated by the lecturer, Helen. With 104 postings at this forum, she clearly had a significant presence at the forum. In response to one student’s reflection she wrote:

*Wow. Can I start the same way you did? Well said Kent. Thank  
you for the insights you provided in this message. I’m sure many  
people are thinking deeply about what you had to say.*

Her tone was never one of authority or superiority; she seemed to come from a position of ‘equality’ while still providing encouragement and guidance. As Hadjioannou (2007) points out, the teacher’s role is key in establishing the right kind of environment for authentic discussions to take place. In adopting a respectful and interested tone, Helen was

making students feel that their presence at the online discussion was valued; she was also modelling the kind of communication considered appropriate for this forum. It is interesting to note that at other times, students also took on this 'mentor' role by encouraging and supporting each other. Students commonly thanked each other for sharing their stories, for example, "I thought that was very touching and lovely to read, Thanks."

The use of friendly humour may be viewed as another way in which students connected with each other and a reflection of the level of trust experienced. According to Hadjioannou (2007: 387), this kind of playfulness is an important component of the classroom environment in that it "appeared to both reflect and help construct the amicable relationships among class members". It can also play an important role in rendering the environment a "safe place" for open discussion, particularly in view of the potentially perilous nature of the topics discussed (Hadjioannou 2007: 393). The following observation by Shelby is a good example of the kind of self-deprecating humour evident throughout this forum: "I feel a good male model will help girls look for more in a partner. Although it is a pity one of my daughters didn't follow her mothers beliefs, LOL."

Helen also modelled this light-hearted approach in some of her responses, for example, "Thank you both for your insightful comments. If women like you ran the country, we'd be in a great position!" As Hadjioannou (2007) points out, these points of lightness may be considered an important relief from the more sobering and intense aspects of the topics discussed. A tone of collegiality was apparent throughout the online discussion about "family", and there were many other examples of such good-natured banter within the data available. Although much of the discussion was serious in tone, the teacher and students could be playful with each other and also laugh at themselves.

### ***Preparedness to take risks***

Because students felt comfortable in this space, they were prepared to take risks in terms of the topics covered. Students shared surprisingly personal and poignant stories about their own real-life experiences, in these cases, their family backgrounds and beliefs about family relationships. Here is an example of a response in which a student talks

about his own dysfunctional family background:

*Mike: Having grown up in a blended family I had an abusive Stepfather and an emotionally absent Mother. Mum stayed with this man because there was no choice. There was no help available for single women with four children, and in her mind we were better off staying with this man, who was physically and emotionally violent towards us, then we would have been on the street. She is now divorced and is all the better for it. The increase in blended families to me says that there are now more choices for men and women who are in that situation.*

The topic of domestic violence is clearly one that is emotion-laden, and yet here the student talks about this in a matter-of-fact way in order to validate his conclusion about the benefit of blended families. In a similar way, Maya shares her disappointment at her own rather unflattering history of relationship breakdowns, again a sensitive and highly personal topic:

*Maya: i really related to your post stacey, i also wanted a 'perfect family' after my experience of not having one growing up. however it didn't happen the 'right' way for me either. 3 kids later to two different dads (once my worst fear) here i am a sole mum, and while i wouldn't have chosen it this way, i'm pretty happy with my family. Like you have said so well, at the end of the day it's the love in your heart that really matters.*

Of course, there is always the danger that such openness could end up as an emotional outpouring rather than a considered and productive discussion about the topic at hand; equally this could happen in a face-to-face classroom discussion without careful monitoring. However, this was generally not the case at this discussion forum, and certainly not true of the postings under study. In Mike's response, the student uses his real-life experience to come to a conclusion about the benefits of changing family norms, while Maya determines that family is more about genuine relationships than conventional structures.

The role of the teacher again appears to be significant in this regard, and the need for a more equal relationship between student and teacher, as

advocated by theorists such as Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) is here endorsed. Helen's non-judgmental and empathetic tone helped to establish an atmosphere in which students felt safe enough to share their vulnerabilities:

*How right you are! Your partner in life not only is your lover but also your best friend. Friendship is important; you need to like and admire your partner for the individual he or she is.*

*Thanks for sharing.*

*Helen*

Most of the personal stories shared at this forum were relevant to the topics under discussion, and did not degenerate into emotional diatribes, though it is possible that there were some reading these forums who would have been uncomfortable with the personal nature of some of the postings. For the most part, students were able to use their own, real-life experiences to illustrate the broader points that they wished to make. However, the fact that so many students revealed personal elements of themselves suggests they felt what they had to say was worthwhile and also says a lot about their sense of safety in this environment. The willingness of students to reveal so much of themselves is another key attribute of an 'authentic discussion' (Hadjioannou, 2007).

### ***Findings and implications***

In summing up the main findings from this study, certain limitations need to be made transparent. I am not suggesting, for example, that all students who contributed to the forum demonstrated the same level of commitment and openness as those featured in this paper, and it could be argued that the students who agreed to have their postings used in the study were already more engaged than most. While claims of generalisability are not the purpose of exploratory studies such as this, the findings presented here do offer important insights into how the concept of 'authenticity' can be applied to an online discussion forum at a university level. This study has shown that the principles of an 'authentic discussion' involving school-aged children can equally be applied to adult learners and that the online discussion forum would seem to provide a suitable space for such engagement. Multiple

viewpoints were expressed, and students seemed to really listen to each other: they built on the ideas of others, sometimes challenging each other, as well as expressing their appreciation of, and empathy for, other viewpoints. The positive ways in which they responded to each other were symptomatic of a supportive and respectful environment. The lecturer, who also modelled this pattern of communication, assumed a role that was one of guidance rather than of authority and control. This climate of trust enabled students to take risks in what they talked about, exposing their vulnerabilities as they shared their personal experiences and beliefs about the topic of 'family'.

The concept of 'authentic discussion' might be seen as having particular resonance with adult learners because of assumptions made about the level of self-awareness they bring to their learning. In encouraging students to share their personal experiences, there is an acknowledgement of the knowledge and understandings they bring to their formal education and this is very much in keeping with the principles of adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Further, when students compare their experiences and opinions with others and make connections with broader social issues, they are engaging in critical self-reflection. Theorists such as Cranton (2006) and Mezirow (1991) suggest that the opportunity for self-reflection is particularly suited to adult learners, possibly because of their broader sets of life experiences and capacity for introspection. Encouraging adults to share in this way can also be a potentially transformative experience, as students gain new insights into the worldviews of themselves and others (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991).

The potential for online learning to enable authentic discussion is another area of research that warrants further study. As higher education adapts to embrace the needs of a changing and more technologically driven world, there needs to be more exploration of the communication patterns in online learning spaces. That is not to suggest that the online environment must necessarily duplicate the conventions of face-to-face teaching, especially as the literature indicates that many classroom discussions fail to achieve anything other than superficial learning because they are so carefully scripted and directed by the teacher (Kennedy, 2005; Nystrand, 1997). Nor is it suggesting that an online environment can achieve the objective of authenticity any more

easily. The nature of asynchronous discussion boards means that there might be much that can be considered contrived about the discussion under scrutiny, especially considering the disproportionately high number of contributions by the lecturer in this study. However, the online environment might well provide a more familiar and ‘real-life’ context for adults whose communication practices increasingly rely on social media. There is scope for more research into the conditions which can inspire online discussion of this type, and the kinds of topics that might foster this level of engagement.

The link between authentic discussions and community-building is also worthy of closer scrutiny. Certainly, the results from this study would seem to indicate that the need for adult learners to feel socially connected to others is one that can be met by participation in online forums. The equal relationship established between the students and the lecturer emerges as significant in encouraging this kind of participation. The atmosphere of collegiality evident in the discussion forum enabled students to be frank and open in what they were prepared to share, at times offering contributions that may be what Hadjioannou described as “socially perilous” (2007: 393). Again, the literature suggests that this feature of authenticity in these discussions is likely to resonate with adult learners who seek to establish equal relationships with the other members of their group, and to be active in their own learning. There is scope for further research into the qualities of lecturers suited to the task of establishing online learning environments conducive to such ‘authentic discussion’, as well as for their training in this regard.

## **Conclusion**

‘Authenticity’ is a concept that has wide appeal in educational contexts because of its associations with meaningful learning and connections to ‘real-life’ experiences. This paper has explored the ways in which the concept of ‘authentic discussion’ may be applied to the context of online learning and the needs of adult learners. Taking the key elements of Hadjioannou’s conceptual framework (2007), the focus of this study was an online forum which featured in an academic writing subject. The students, enrolled in a university preparatory program, seemed to engage in authentic discussion in that they appeared to really ‘listen’ to each other as they discussed the changing nature of the Australian

family: they could acknowledge multiple viewpoints, build on the ideas of each other, but also challenge each other if they did not agree. The respectful and attentive way in which participants responded to each other created a supportive learning environment. Empathy and compassion were evident in many of the postings under review, and the use of light-hearted banter also had a positive impact. The sense of comfort in this environment was such that students were able to take risks; they shared openly with each other, detailing highly personal and, at times, self-deprecating accounts of their real-life experiences. The role of the lecturer seemed crucial in constructing this sense of safety and support. Though there are clearly limitations to the flow of an online discussion in terms of spontaneity, there is scope for students to benefit in a range of ways, including opportunities to feel like they have a voice that is valued, and to develop critical thinking skills. In the world of higher education, in which online learning environments are becoming integral to learning and teaching, it seems worthwhile to investigate the ways in which the communication that takes place within that space can provide students with a measure of ‘authenticity’ in their learning. For adult learners, making meaningful and honest connections with others seems to be a critical ingredient in achieving such outcomes.

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## **About the Author**

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## Epistemological Development and Critical Thinking in Post-Secondary

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*Using Kegan's constructive-developmental theory, this study explores to what extent epistemological development is a factor in critical thinking performance and learning in reading and writing among a diverse group of six adult learners. Analysis of a developmental interview, a summative assessment and participant surveys indicated that learners constructing meaning from earlier developmental perspectives demonstrated lower critical thinking in reading and writing, and expressed successes and challenges in accordance with their developmental perspectives. Implications are discussed for supporting critical thinking growth for developmentally diverse adult learners.*

**Keywords:** *Adult development; critical thinking; reading/writing; academic literacy; constructive-developmental theory*

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### Introduction

Developing critical thinking skills in reading and writing is increasingly

recognised as important for preparing educationally disadvantaged adults for the post-secondary education they will need to compete in knowledge-based workforces. Canada's Language Benchmarks for adult English as a Second Language Learners and United States Adult Basic Education (ABE) guidelines include critical thinking skills such as identifying an author's purpose, main idea, intent, and line of reasoning, and communicating complex concepts using abstract language (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012; Pimentel, 2013). In the United States, the General Education Diploma, recognised by many states as a high school diploma alternative, was revised in 2014 to require and assess the ability to write logical, cohesive arguments with claims supported by evidence (GED Testing Service, 2013). As more adults enter post-secondary institutions, their ability to think critically in reading and writing is essential (Pimentel, 2013).

However, many adults entering post-secondary in the United States underperform in critical thinking in reading and writing (Flores et. al., 2012; Pitmann, 2010). A relevant theoretical lens not frequently considered in addressing this issue is that of adult epistemological development. The family of adult developmental theories that focus on epistemological growth are *constructive-developmental*, based on the tenet that adults actively construct rather than passively observe reality, and that the logics through which they make meaning become more complex over time. Constructive-developmental theories suggest that some adults will be "in over their heads" in facing "the curriculum of modern life," (Kegan, 1994). Few studies, however, have investigated how epistemological complexity shapes critical thinking in reading and writing (Kane, 2005; Shapiro, 1984), particularly among educationally disadvantaged adults.

The purpose of this study was to use a constructive-developmental lens to understand to what extent epistemological complexity is a factor in developing critical thinking skills in the context of reading and writing. The question guiding this research was: *How might adult learners' epistemological complexity impact their critical thinking performance and learning in reading and writing?* The adult learners in this study were enrolled as students at a tuition-based private university in the state of Minnesota in the United States, where they registered for English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) or

remedial classes to prepare for admission to a degree program. Because they tested below twelfth grade reading levels, they also qualified to enrol in Minnesota's ABE system, which is publicly funded and non-tuition based, administered through the Minnesota Department of Education, and delivered through non-profit organizations and public school districts. Therefore these learners were also enrolled in an ABE class through a community-based organization partnering with their university. In this study, I found that learners demonstrated and described successes and challenges with critical thinking in reading and writing in ways that reflected their epistemological complexity as per constructive-developmental theory, suggesting that for these learners, epistemological development played a role in critical thinking in reading and writing, and that constructive-developmental theory may help explain their successes and challenges.

In focusing on academically underprepared learners, this study joins a small but growing body of research using a constructive-developmental lens to explore the learning and growth of educationally disadvantaged adult populations (Bridwell, 2013; Drago-Severson, 2004; Lindsley, 2011). Some scholars have noted the potential risk of investigating disadvantaged adult learners through a developmental lens, which may favour growth and higher stages of development often afforded by resource-rich environments and access to privileges such as formal education and time for reflection (Hoare, 2006; Brookfield and Holst, 2011). Popp and Boes (2001) also state that a constructive-developmental approach to competence risks being construed as deficit-oriented, as nuanced, abstract thinking is possible only at certain stages of adult development (Perry, 1970; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Loevinger, 1976). However, the importance of critical thinking in reading and writing warrants investigation from all relevant perspectives, and a constructive-developmental lens may help illuminate not only developmental challenges, but developmentally appropriate approaches to supporting learning and growth (Drago-Severson 2004; Kegan et. al. 2001).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Constructive-developmental theory is based on the constructivist tenet that people actively construct rather than passively observe

reality (Drago-Severson, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 1994). Critically, it is also founded on the empirically supported theory of developmentalism, which maintains that the logics through which people construct reality develop over time and follow predictable patterns, moving hierarchically toward increasingly complex ways of knowing (Baxter-Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1970). Kegan's constructive developmental-theory, which informs this study, belongs to a family of theoretical models including Kohlberg's (1981) and Gilligan's (1982) models of moral development; Loevinger's (1976) theory of ego development; Perry's (1970) stages of ethical and intellectual development in the college years; and Belenky's (1997) stages of women's development. While distinct in emphasis, each constructive-developmental theory expands on Jean Piaget's work on child development.

Constructive-developmental theory describes why some adult learners are likely to struggle with critical thinking skills in reading and writing. In particular, a concrete, or *instrumental* thinker constructs meaning with the same black-and-white logic that characterizes Piaget's concrete operational stage. At this stage, a person cannot yet make abstractions or inferences (Kegan 1982). Longitudinal adult developmental research suggests that while fewer than five percent of North American adults construct meaning entirely with this epistemological perspective, up to 36 percent are partially instrumental knowers (Kegan, 1994). The epistemological structure of the instrumental way of knowing is *categorical* (Kegan, 1994). That is, instrumental learners think through one category at a time, and can't coordinate different categories of information. This in turn makes it impossible for a fully instrumental knower to make inferences, abstractions, or generalisations (Drago-Severson, 2004). Taylor (2006) describes the writing that instrumental learners are likely to produce as "a brain dump," of disconnected and unedited thoughts (p.207).

Kegan (1982) explains that with the *socializing* way of knowing, the underlying epistemological structure is *cross-categorical*. Socializing learners can cross-reference different categories, take others' perspectives, and, vital for critical thinking, make abstractions, inferences and generalizations. At the next, *self-authoring* way of knowing, adults can examine and take responsibility for their own

thinking, feelings and patterns, which Taylor et al. (2000) describe as “the mainspring of adult development” (p.30). A small number of adults construct meaning beyond the self-authoring way of knowing (Kegan, 1994).

The concrete, categorical thinking of the instrumental stage poses a challenge to tasks such as identifying the main idea of a text, because stating a main idea requires relating, synthesizing and generalizing different pieces of information. Constructive-developmental theory suggests that learners who are transitioning from instrumental toward socializing ways of knowing are still developing the very epistemological structures that will allow them to generalise and make inferences (Drago-Severson, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 2006). This study was motivated by the struggle that many learners demonstrate with critical thinking in reading and writing and the relevance of constructive-developmental theory to this challenge.

## **Methodology**

In a study with educationally disadvantaged and culturally diverse participants, it is important to note that the primary theoretical lens for this study, constructive-developmental theory, derives from the field of Western developmental psychology. Likewise, the critical thinking framework used in this study, from the Critical Thinking Foundation (Paul & Elder, 2006, 2008), derives from a Western lineage of analytic thinking (Brookfield, 2012). My understanding of adult development and critical thinking is informed by these theories, and is necessarily culturally constructed and predisposed.

In my dual role of teacher and researcher, I emphasised to participants, in writing and verbally, that the choice to participate or not would in no way affect their success in the class and that they could opt out at any time with no questions asked. I also explained that individual identities would be protected in any publication through using pseudonyms, avoiding naming their educational institutions, and including no content or identifying information from their Subject Object Interviews (SOIs). This study was held to high ethical standards as per approval by the Institutional Review Boards of my university and of the university where this research was conducted.

## **Method**

To examine how epistemological development might impact performance and learning in critical thinking in reading and writing, I engaged in an explanatory qualitative case study. A qualitative study is appropriate for exploring relationships between the interrelated processes (Maxwell, 2005) of epistemological development and critical thinking, and a case study is appropriate for doing so within a bounded system narrow in scope with finite participants (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2013; Yin, 2009). An explanatory case study allowed me to explain the impact of epistemological development on critical thinking through the lens of constructive-developmental theory (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2013; Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) states that the validity with which explanatory qualitative case studies can account for how and why one event leads to another is increased where additional explanatory factors are also considered. Accordingly, to take reading ability into account along with epistemological complexity, I measured reading ability through the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE).

To enhance reflexivity, I regularly considered, “How might I be wrong?” (Maxwell, 2005). I also regularly discussed findings during the research process with the two experienced colleagues not connected to my research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and shared my interpretations with a colleague knowledgeable of constructive-developmental theory, inviting alternate interpretations to my own during the process (Krefting, 1991).

### ***Site Selection and Participants***

The participants in this study consisted of six diverse learners. Of the three American-born participants, one self-identified as African-American and two self-identified as Hispanic. Three were ESOL learners who arrived in the U.S. as adults and were from Ethiopia, Togo, and Somalia. Of the two Hispanic participants, one identified Spanish as her first language; the other identified Spanish and English as her first two languages. The African-American participant identified English as her first and only language.

1. Participation in the study was optional. Seven of eight students volunteered to participate. Six of seven met the following criteria and were thus included in the study: the seventh did

not meet the second criteria, demonstrating strong writing ability early on in the class, and thus was not included.

2. Participants were enrolled as ABE learners in a supplementary academic literacy class at the advisement of their post-secondary institution.
3. Participants demonstrated inability to clearly and accurately summarise a health news article in the initial course assignment.

Participants qualified as ABE learners by virtue of having a valid score at or below a twelfth grade reading level on a standardised TABE reading test at the time they joined the academic literacy class. One participant tested at an 11.1 grade reading level at the beginning of a class, but 12.9 by the time of the midterm. Her reading level is thus reported as 12.9; 12.9+ is the highest possible score on this test.

Four of the six participants were enrolled in the academic literacy class for both fall (September to December) and spring (February to May) terms. Two of the six participants joined the class in February of spring semester. I instructed the class, and participants were my students at the time of the research.

The primary purpose of the course was to teach the critical thinking in reading and writing skills assessed in this study. These skills are second and third level critical thinking skills in the Critical Thinking Foundation's *The Thinker's Guide to How to Read a Paragraph: The Art of Close Reading* (Paul & Elder, 2008), which was a core textbook.

### **Data and Instruments**

To assess learner's epistemological complexity I used the structured Subject Object Interview (SOI), created by developmental psychologist Robert Kegan and colleagues (Lahey, 1988) to assess developmental levels. During the one-hour interview, participants described experiences connected to words written on index cards. For example, in response to a card labelled "important to me," a participant might describe a recent experience trying to meet a goal. The interviewer would ask follow-up questions to understand how the participant

constructs meaning about that experience, for example, “What did that mean to you?” or “How did you know whether you were successful?” While some participants spoke English as a second or other language, their verbal conversational English skills were strong, and they appeared to express themselves throughout the interviews with ease.

The SOI interviews were analysed according to prescribed procedures. Possible developmental stages range from instrumental (2), socializing (3), self-authoring (4) up to self-transcending (5). Between any two balance points, there are four possible sub-stages. In sum, the SOI measures 16 total developmental distinctions including developmental stages and sub-stages. Inter-rater reliability of the SOI is high at 87% complete agreement between two raters. Reliability is defined as agreement between two raters within a single sub-stage, or one-fifth of a stage (Lahey et. al., 1988). In this study, 100% agreement was achieved between a second scorer and me upon discussion. I was trained and certified as a reliable assessor of the SOI by Antioch University Midwest in 2011, and my co-scorer was a developmental psychologist with over 20 years’ experience administering the SOI. Co-scoring with an SOI expert decreased the likelihood of possible bias in my SOI assessments.

To understand participants’ critical thinking in reading and writing performance and learning, I analysed their performance on midterm and final exams. The final exams were administered eight weeks after the midterms. In each of the two exams, participants identified the purpose, main idea and most important information in each section of a multi-section article. These tasks were drawn from the Critical Thinking Foundations’ model of reading and writing (2008), and paralleled assessment items in the corresponding International Critical Thinking Reading and Writing Test (2006). The tasks drawn from this model were limited in accordance with what learners were taught in the class, increasing congruence between the instrument and instruction (Imel, S., and ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, C. H., 1990). The midterm and final also prompted responses with *academic language frames*, including “*The purpose of this article is...; The author explains/shows/demonstrates...; and Important information the author includes is...*”. Language frames help scaffold academic language, recognising that Academic English is a language variety that some diverse learners need to explicitly learn (Leki, 1999; Swales & Feak, 2003, 2004; Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).

I analysed each critical thinking task using a rubric adapted from the International Critical Thinking Reading and Writing Test scale (2006). My rubric for scoring the midterms and finals paralleled that of the International Critical Thinking Reading and Writing test (Paul & Elder, 2006) with two adaptations. The first was the addition of the intellectual standard of *relevance* to those of *clarity* and *accuracy* to the rubric, which allowed me to distinguish between a response that was *inaccurate and irrelevant* versus *inaccurate but relevant*. The second difference was that my rubric included one, rather than two, points within each of the five possible evaluation levels. Before scoring the exams, I co-scored the first of three sections with a colleague with expertise teaching critical thinking and academic language skills to ABE and remedial college learners. We achieved 100 percent agreement on evaluations of each assessment upon discussion. Mackey and Gass (2005) suggest applying the high standards of clinical research for inter-rater reliability in second language research, in which “anything above 75 percent may be considered ‘good,’ although percentages over 90 percent are ideal” (p.244). Co-scoring with another instructor also decreased the likelihood of possible bias in my assessments of exams due to my dual role as instructor and researcher.

Tables 1 and 2 show the rubrics used to assess performance on identifying purpose, main idea, and important information.

**Table 1:** Rubric scores for purpose and main idea

4	3	2	1	0
The summary/analysis very <b>clearly</b> and <b>accurately</b> states all parts of the purpose/main idea, including nuance of meaning.	All major aspects of the purpose/main idea are stated <b>accurately</b> , with reasonable clarity. No parts of the main idea are left out.	At least one important part of the purpose/main idea is stated <b>accurately</b> , with reasonable <b>clarity</b> .	Author’s purpose/main idea is mis-identified, but what is written is <b>relevant</b> to the purpose.	Author’s purpose/main idea is mis-identified, and what is written is not <b>relevant</b> to the purpose/main idea.

**Table 2:** Rubric scores for important, or key information

4	3	2	1	0
Enough key information to support the whole purpose/main idea is stated <b>clearly</b> and <b>accurately</b> , explicitly connecting key information to the purpose/main idea.	Enough key information to support the whole purpose/main idea is stated <b>accurately</b> , with reasonable <b>clarity</b> , and is <b>relevant</b> to the purpose/main idea.	At least one piece of key information is stated <b>accurately</b> , with reasonable <b>clarity</b> , and is <b>relevant</b> to the purpose/main idea.	Key information is not <b>clearly</b> and <b>accurately</b> stated, or important key information is missing, but what is stated is <b>relevant</b> to the purpose or main idea.	Key information is not <b>relevant</b> to the main idea, or important key information is missing.

The midterm article analyses and the SOIs were administered within a month of each other, and the final was administered eight weeks after the midterm. Previous developmental research indicates that measurable growth takes a minimum of several months and more often years. Therefore, it is unlikely that participants’ developmental perspectives would have measurably changed by the time the midterm and final were administered, and that changes in performance reflected learning within the current stage of development rather than growth between stages of development.

In the tradition of qualitative research, I also coded errors in each response that was scored at 0 or 1 to better understand error patterns where participants performed most poorly. The two most common patterns were statements that were either too narrow or broad to be accurate. My co-scorer and I achieved 100 percent agreement on which patterns appeared in the data we co-scored. Co-scoring error patterns with another instructor also decreased the likelihood of possible bias in my assessments of exams due to my dual role as instructor and researcher.

To understand participants' perspectives on their learning, I administered a survey a week after the final exam, asking them to rate the level of difficulty of each critical thinking task at the beginning and end of the semester on a scale from 1 (very difficult), 2 (somewhat difficult), 3 (somewhat easy) to 4 (very easy). After each task, I prompted, "Please explain." I also asked two open-ended questions: "Describe in as much detail as you can what makes it easy or difficult to state the author's purpose, main idea, and important information" and "Describe in as much detail as you can how our class activities have or have not helped you with author's purpose, main idea and important information." I analysed open-answered questions by coding for patterns. I first eliminated data with no discernable relevance to their perceptions of their learning. I then separated responses relating to challenges versus successes, and coded themes within each.

Lastly, I brought participants' standardized TABE reading tests scores into consideration to understand to what extent their reading grade level may have impacted their performance and learning. Participants' TABE reading scores were administered a within a week of their midterms as scheduled by the community based organization requiring them.

## **Findings**

There are five sets of findings, including participants' TABE reading test scores, stages of epistemological development, critical thinking in reading and writing performance on the midterm and final exams, error patterns, and survey responses. The SOI data includes scores that reveal complexity of meaning-making, but no interview content, as per the purpose of the interview and conditions of the participant confidentiality agreement.

Findings suggest that participants' critical thinking in reading and writing successes and challenges were consistent with the strengths and limitations of their stage of epistemological development as per Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory; that critical thinking in reading and writing scores more consistently reflected epistemological development than reading level; and that the ways participants perceived their learning were consistent with their developmental perspectives.

### **Demographics and TABE scores**

Participants' English reading level as measured by the TABE varied. Reading level grade equivalents ranged from 6.2 to 12.9, and did not directly reflect years of school in English or language background. (cf. Table 3 below).

### **Epistemological complexity**

The SOI scores showed that participants constructed meaning between instrumental and socializing stages of epistemological development. Grace, Brittany and Maricella's SOI scores of 2/3 indicated that their ways of knowing were between two developmental *balance points* with a dominantly instrumental (2) way of knowing, but also with a fully-operating socializing (3) way of knowing. Jahzara and Silvia's SOI scores of 3/2 indicated that they were also in transition between instrumental and socializing ways of knowing, with socializing rather than instrumental being dominant. Only Khalli's SOI score of 3 indicated a fully socializing way of knowing (cf. Table 3 below).

**Table 3:** *Demographics and TABE scores*

Participant	SOI score	Ethnicity	Age	Country of origin	Yrs. in an Eng.-speaking country	First language(s)	Yrs. Eng. in School	TABE score (1-12.9+)
Grace	2/3	African	19	Togo	2	Mina, French	4	8.3
Brittney	2/3	African-American	18	U.S.	18	English	15	9
Maricella	2/3	Hispanic	20	U.S.	20	English, Spanish	16	10.7
Jahzara	3/2	African	41	Ethiopia	20	Oromo	6	6.2
Silvia	3/2	Hispanic	20	U.S.	20	Spanish	15	12.9
Khalli	3	African	28	Somalia	13	Somali	8	6.2

### **Critical thinking in reading and writing**

Critical thinking in reading and writing tasks on the midterm and final exams were assessed on a rubric indicating no demonstrated ability and

four levels of increasing ability. Each critical thinking task was scored individually, then averaged to represent overall performance (cf. Table 4 below).

**Table 4:** Rubric scores for purpose and main idea

Participant (with level of development)	Midterm: Author's purpose	Mid- term: Main idea	Midterm: Im- port- ant infor- mation	Midterm: Average score	Final: Author's purpose	Final: Main idea	Final: Im- port- ant infor- mation	Fi- nal: Av- erage score
Grace (2/3)	0.25	0.25	1	0.5	.75	1.25	1.75	1.3
Brittney (2/3)	0.25	0.25	0.66	0.39	1.75	1.25	2	1.7
Maricella (2/3)	1	1	1	1	1.75	1.75	2	1.8
Jahzara (3/2)	2	1	2	1.7	1.25	2.33	2.33	2
Silvia (3/2)	2.33	1.66	1	1.6	1.25	1	2.5	1.6
Khalli (3)	2	1.3	1	1.4	2.75	2.66	2.75	2.76

As a whole, participants with nearly dominant or dominantly socializing developmental stages performed higher with critical thinking in reading and writing than their dominantly instrumental counterparts on the midterm and final, with the exception of Silvia. Two of three dominantly socializing or socializing participants were able to improve to an average score of “2” or above, reflecting an ability to state at least part of a main idea and relate some supporting information to that idea. All three dominantly instrumental participants improved, but remained below a “2” average, indicating inability to consistently state at least part of a main idea and relate some supporting information to that idea.

Coding of each segment where participants scored a 0 or 1 showed that errors were often made by writing statements that were *too narrow* or *too broad* to be accurate. Other error types included going outside the text or being generally unclear, but those mistakes were fewer. Overall, all participants constructing meaning from a dominantly instrumental way of knowing more frequently trended toward erring too broad or too narrow.

Participants' TABE reading levels did not show a clear connection to critical thinking in reading and writing performance. While Grace and Brittney scored between eighth and ninth grade reading levels on the TABE, both performed below the first competence level on the midterm, with improvement on the final. Notably, Jahzara, dominantly socializing, and Khalli, fully socializing, scored higher on the midterm and final despite significantly lower TABE reading level equivalents, grade 6.2.

Length of time participants were enrolled in the class did not appear to impact performance consistently. Notably, among the three dominantly instrumental participants, there was a stronger pattern of association between developmental perspective and critical thinking performance than there was to TABE reading levels or length of time in the course.

Participants' perceptions of their learning and what helped them reflected their developmental perspectives. Both dominantly instrumental participants, Brittney and Silvia, described difficulty with distinguishing the author's purpose and main idea of an article, e.g., *"What makes it sometimes difficult to state the author's purpose or main idea is that they both seem similar to me, but there [sic] not"*. Jahzara, dominantly socializing, noted, *"Finding the main idea is harder than other three [sic] for me because sometime [sic] I can find more than one main idea. Once I find the main idea it's easy to find the rest."* In describing strategies that helped them, both dominantly concrete participants stated, *"Classroom activities."* In a similar vein but with emphasis on collaboration, Jahzara stated, *"I can learn from others."* Silvia spoke to the process of first identifying broader concepts, then relating details to those concepts: *"What makes it easy is reading the title and brainstorming what you can expect to find in the text, and once that was taken care of, reading the text, one can tell what is needed to support the main idea and purpose."* Khalli, the fully socializing participant, reflected on her previous inclination to over- or under-generalize: *"What makes difficult [sic] for me to state the main idea was that I was stating either broder [sic] ideas or details. And now I know to look [sic] the big picture. And about the importen [sic] information I was focusing too much on the daitals [sic] or other unnessesery [sic] information. Now I know to just look at the main points the author brings up."*

## Discussion

This study focused on how epistemological development might impact critical thinking performance and learning in reading and writing. I have argued that given the implications of constructive-developmental theory on adult learners' abilities to make the abstractions, inferences and generalizations required to analyse texts, and the significance of these skills for academic success, that it is important to raise the question of how development might impact academic performance to better support educationally disadvantaged learners. This study showed that participants demonstrated successes and challenges consistent with the strengths and limitations of their epistemological perspectives.

Findings of how these ABE/remedial college learners construct meaning is relatable to limited previous ABE and community college developmental studies, in which learners with limited educational backgrounds, and those younger than 25, are more likely to construct meaning from, or partly from, an instrumental way of knowing (Boyer, 2007; Drago-Severson, 2004).

Findings that learners who construct meaning from a primarily instrumental way of knowing demonstrated lower critical thinking performance is consistent with what constructive-developmental theory would anticipate based on the *categorical* epistemological structure that instrumental knowers construct meaning from. Kegan (1994) describes how from an instrumental point of view, what a movie is "about" consists of successive events on a linear narrative "on a concrete level" but that only by constructing meaning *cross-categorically*, at the socializing way of knowing, can they "organise an abstract theme of which this story is an expression" (p.33). It is logical, then, that the main idea would be challenging for categorical thinkers to identify, as demonstrated by the three dominantly instrumental learners in this study, even by the final exam.

The *cross-categorical* epistemology underlying the socializing way of knowing allows separate categories of information to be considered in relationship to each other. It is this "third order of consciousness" that allows socializing learners to look at, rather than through, durable categories. Socializing learners can relate durable categories to each other, and as a result generate abstractions. It is logical that the

participants constructing meaning further into the socializing way of knowing would be more successful in analysing an article than their dominantly instrumental colleagues.

All learners in this study also erred on the side of *too narrow* or *too broad* when stating author's purpose, main idea, or key information. Those participants making meaning with a dominantly instrumental way of knowing, however, made this type of mistake more frequently, especially erring on the side of *too narrow*, seemingly mistaking details for main ideas or purpose. This is logically consistent with instrumental knowers' concrete orientation to meaning-construction (Kegan, 1982, 1994). The fully socializing participant, and one of the two dominantly socializing participants, were able to eliminate this type of error on their finals.

Participants' descriptions of their learning reflected being in transition from the instrumental to socializing ways of knowing, as well as their dominant epistemological perspective. The two dominantly instrumental participants described confusing the author's purpose and main idea, consistent with the difficulty with distinguishing abstractions from an instrumental perspective. Both participants who were dominantly socializing described some difficulty identifying a main idea, consistent with being in transition between instrumental and socializing ways of knowing, but comfort with relating important information to those ideas once they've been clarified. The fully socializing participant's ability to see the "big picture," and to reflect on her thinking process for doing so are consistent with her socializing epistemological perspective (Kegan, 1982, 1994). That both dominantly instrumental and dominantly socializing learners identified group work as helpful is consistent with Kegan et. al.'s (2001) finding that cohorts can support learning and growth at all levels of development.

### **Limitations**

In this small case study with only six participants, connections between epistemological complexity and critical thinking in reading and writing apply only to the participants themselves. In seeking to understand cause and effect relationships, (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013; Yin, 2009), qualitative case studies necessarily favour a particular explanatory lens and de-emphasise others (Yin, 2009). Other factors beyond

reading level that may have impacted these participants' performance and learning in critical thinking in reading and writing, such as age, educational backgrounds, and learning styles, were not investigated.

At the same time, the dominantly instrumental to socializing ways of knowing found among these learners is consistent with ways of knowing found in research with three previous studies (Boyer, 2007; Bridwell, 2013; Drago-Severson, 2004). Additionally, the patterns of challenges with critical thinking in reading and writing in this small group were logically consistent with what could be anticipated based on their epistemological complexity, and is relatable to previous research connecting epistemological complexity to rhetorical maturity (Shapiro, 1984).

It would be useful to further investigate how epistemological complexity impacts critical thinking in reading and writing performance to better understand the inter-relationship between critical thinking development and epistemological development over time. It would also be helpful to further investigate what approaches most successfully support critical thinking learning at different stages of development, including from the perspectives of adult learners themselves.

## **Implications**

Constructive-developmental theory suggests that instrumental knowers are still developing the epistemological complexity needed for critical thinking in reading and writing. The findings of this study were consistent with that theory, suggesting that critical thinking may require not only learning but epistemological development itself. It also affirms the explanatory power of constructive-developmental theory in relation to critical thinking in reading and writing. The fact that five out of six participants improved after practicing critical thinking in reading and writing suggests that learners across developmental levels can improve critical thinking skills, and is consistent with Lai's (2011) assertion that critical thinking should be explicitly taught as well as integrated into instruction.

In supporting adult learners developing critical thinking skills, especially those constructing meaning from a partially instrumental perspective of development, it is important to recognise that skill development may

take more time and require distinct types of challenge and support, or *holding environments*. Drago-Severson (2004) explains that because of developmental variation among learners, “the very same curriculum, classroom activities, or teaching behaviours can leave some learners feeling satisfied and well attended while others feel frustrated or lost” (p.15). For some learners, therefore, it is important to scaffold abstract material (Drago-Severson, 2004; Taylor, 2006). Taylor (2006) likens developmental scaffolding in instruction to Vygotski’s (1978) notion of proximal development, the distance between what a learner can do independently and with support. Taylor recommends creating multiple opportunities for learners to experience, with support, constructing knowledge just beyond the level of complexity that the learner can construct independently, and to develop learners’ own “capacity for self-scaffolding” (p.209).

If instrumental learners struggle more with critical thinking in reading and writing, and the developmental growth that supports these competencies can take years, it follows that adult educators should strive not only to teach critical thinking in developmentally appropriate ways, but to create learning environments that support epistemological development itself.

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## **1974-1976: the seeds of longevity in a pathway to tertiary participation at University of Newcastle, NSW**

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*By the 1960s equality of opportunity was a dominant theme in social science research, and in keeping with this trend, the Whitlam Labor Government abolished university fees in 1974 to open university access, especially to talented women and men who otherwise would not contemplate a university career. In the same year also the University of Newcastle instituted a radical new plan to open up its doors to the wider community of 'non traditional students'. This paper explores the history of the enabling program that resulted, the Open Foundation Program, focusing on the 1974 pilot program and its first two years of full operation. Thought at the time likely to 'drain its market' within five years, the Open Foundation has flourished and grown for forty years. The analysis focuses on hitherto unexplored aspects of the program and canvasses three key themes: curriculum and pedagogy, access and success, and support and retention, in order to understand the seeds of this longevity.*

**Keywords:** *enabling education; history; widening participation; access programs; non traditional students*

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In 1974 the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, instituted a radical new plan to open its doors to the wider community of 'non traditional students', that is, those students not taken directly from the secondary schools. This paper explores the very early history of the enabling program that resulted, called the Open Foundation. While institutional histories of universities are common, little historical research has been carried out on the internal features and outcomes of key tertiary programs, and even less on these aspects of enabling programs. Here we drill down into the first few years of this ground-breaking experiment in adult education within the Australian university sector to examine curricular, pedagogical and experiential aspects. We begin by outlining the institutional framework behind the initiation of the program, then move into a consideration from the scant documentation that survives, of the curriculum and pedagogy, access and success, and support and retention from 1974 to 1976. The evidence includes archival materials held by the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre and the Cultural Collections Unit of the University of Newcastle Library, survey and interview data gathered for the co-author's doctoral study, and secondary literature, historical and theoretical. We argue that the open style of entry, academic culture and flexible structures introduced in these years have enabled the Open Foundation to flourish over the decades with little change in its basic philosophy and *modus operandi*. First, some contextual understanding for the establishment of the Open Foundation in 1974 will set the scene.

### **Newcastle University and the establishment of the Open Foundation**

Alan Barcan (2007: 29) commented in a recent paper on the history of Australian adult education, that 'anyone involved in adult education during the 1950s, 60s or 70s would be aware of the remarkable change that it underwent thereafter.' According to Don Anderson, adults had been admitted through various access schemes from the establishment of the universities in Australia in 1852 but that, despite early champions of wider participation such as John Woodley, Professor of Classics at the University of Sydney who said in 1865 that 'the doors of the university' should be 'open to the intellect of the whole country' (Anderson, 1990: 39), the universities remained elite institutions until just after World War Two. At this time, many returned service men and women were encouraged to, and did, undertake degree studies (Dymock and Billet,

2010)<sup>1</sup>. The movement for greater access gathered momentum in the altruistic and democratising trends after the war. For example, both the Murray (1957) and the Martin (1964) Reports on Australian higher education asserted that universities must not ignore the ‘under tapped pool of ability’ within the Australian population but be open to all with the ability to undertake degree studies (Anderson, 1990). In response to rising demand from the population, the university sector expanded rapidly. See Table 1 below with data extracted from Chanock (2011: A38-A39).

**Table 1:** *Timeline of Growth of Australian university sector to 1998 and some key events.*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Universities</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>
<b>Before 1939</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14,000</b>
<b>1958</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>41,865</b>
1965	The binary system of higher education created with the new Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs)	
<b>1969</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>109,665</b>
1974	Federal Labor abolished university fees & introduced the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme (TEAS)	
<b>1978</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>160,035</b>
1987	AUSTUDY created	
1988	The creation of the unified national system with the abolition of the CAEs	
1989	Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS)	
<b>1998</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>671,853</b>

The establishment of the Open Foundation Program (OFP) at the University of Newcastle, first as a pilot in 1974, and then formally from 1975, can be viewed as part and product of the next wave of this great change to open up higher education then underway (May, 2005: passim). Locally however the creation of the Open Foundation had to await the establishment of first the autonomous University of Newcastle

in 1965, and within it, the Department of Community Programs.

### **The Department of Community Programs: a vehicle for the Open Foundation**

Within five years of its foundation as a full autonomous university, the University of Newcastle, one of the so-called ‘gumtrees universities’ established in the 1960s and 70s to receive the postwar baby boomers<sup>2</sup>, made moves to enter the field of adult education. Until that time the Department of Adult Education of the University of Sydney, in conjunction with the Workers Educational Association (WEA), had been offering joint adult education classes through its Newcastle Regional Office for over fifty years when the University of Newcastle began to consider its role in adult education within its regional footprint (Turner, 1972: 2)<sup>3</sup>. This decision to take to the field of community and adult education began with a University of Newcastle Senate Committee in 1970. L. N. Short, Professor of Education, chaired a meeting of the Committee to investigate adult education in Newcastle on 4 February 1970. The other Committee members were: Dr W. V. Doniela, Mr E. Flowers (University Librarian), Professor J. A. Keats, Professor B. Newton-John, and Associate Professor A.S. Ritchie. As a result of its deliberations the Senate in April 1970 resolved that the University would, in its 1973-1975 triennium submission to the Australian Universities Commission, seek approval for the foundation of a Department of Adult Education to take over and develop the adult education program then offered in the Hunter Valley by the University of Sydney. The Short Committee was tasked to ‘consider the contribution the university might make to (a) adult education and university extension work, (b) community development, (c) wider understanding of the function of the university in the community, and any related matters’ (The Short Report, 1972).

The Short Committee reported to the Senate in 1972. It recommended that the University establish a Department of Community Programs, the name ‘suggesting a somewhat broader approach than is usually associated with “Adult Education” (The Short Report, 1972). This move coincided with the withdrawal of the University of Sydney from its joint adult education program with the WEA. The Department of Community Programs was to have a Director at the helm who should be a member

ex-officio of the Senate and the Chief Executive Officer of the Board of Community Programs to be established under the general control of the Senate. The Director was to be found by open selection with a salary at the rank of Associate Professor or Professor. There was to be a minimum of four academic staff (including the Director) and one administrative assistant. It was also recommended that the staff of the Department of Adult Education of the University of Sydney – one senior lecturer, two lecturers and two secretaries - who were then stationed in Newcastle be offered appointment in the new Department without loss of salary or entitlements.

In announcing these developments, the University of Newcastle Vice Chancellor, Professor J. J. Auchmuty, wrote that this ‘followed from an acceptance of the proposition that the resources of the University had relevance to the needs of the community and should be readily available’ (*University News*, 1972). The University should promote intellectual values, provide specialised knowledge, and conduct research and development on a wide range of community problems. It should also make its facilities available for theatre, music and arts. Professor Auchmuty defined the University of Newcastle footprint, within which the Department of Community Programs would serve, as bounded by lines drawn from Taree to Murrurundi, from Murrurundi to Dunedoo and from Dunedoo to Woy Woy (*University News*, 1972)<sup>4</sup>.

The Department of Community Programs thus came into being in 1972 and Senior Lecturer John Turner was its acting head while the search for the Director was conducted (Archives Folder BCP 4:73, 1973). The new Director, Dr Brian Smith, a merchant seaman turned academic and philosopher who was keenly interested in adult education, was appointed in 1973 (Wright, 1992: 138)<sup>5</sup>. Dr Smith was introduced to the University community in the *University News* in June 1973. In a broad ranging interview reflecting on his ideas for the new Department, Smith commented that:

Following the success of the British Open University, strong moves are afoot to provide in Australia some effectively equivalent form of open access to tertiary education. Many people like to try universities before committing themselves, and I feel sure that special “bridge courses” demanding serious study over a full year,

adapted to the attitudes and capabilities of mature people, could be both valuable and popular (*University News*, 14 June 1973).

So it seems that Brian Smith had from the start of his tenure a very clear idea of what he wanted to achieve in the area of widening participation for adults in Newcastle.

In a document entitled 'Special Bridge Course' that Brian Smith wrote as a draft publicity release for the Open Foundation Course in 1973, he stated that in his view a movement into an era of 'open education' was underway where age was no barrier to higher education and may even be an advantage. He wrote though that:

This does not mean that everybody should take a university degree, or even that everybody has the capacity to do so. It does mean that people who feel the urge to do so, for whatever reason, should be given encouragement and opportunity (Smith, 1974).

He went on to outline a comprehensive plan for the curriculum, staffing and mode of study in the program for a suggested pilot of the Open Foundation in 1974. As will be shown the Open Foundation was predicated on the assumption that what adults needed most in an access program was flexibility in terms of access, mode of study, curriculum and engagement strategies, all factors clearly identified in the current literature. This integral flexibility contributed to its longevity, allowing the Open Foundation to survive and become one of the oldest and largest continuously operating such program in Australia.

### **The Open Foundation Program in Operation: curriculum and pedagogy**

As has been noted elsewhere, the 'trial run' of the Open Foundation occurred in 1974 with a quota of eighty students (Wright, 1992: 139). Smith described the course curriculum as 'a year of intensive study at university level but adopting modern multidisciplinary approaches ... designed to appeal to enquiring mature minds' (Smith, 1974). This accent on what appealed to 'enquiring mature minds' guided the curriculum content and process.

The overall theme of the Open Foundation course was 'Society and Humanity', which was also the name originally given to the core course

or 'lecture series' which all students had to attend (designed in the face of contemporary feminist calls for inclusive language, this course became 'Political Man' in 1975). The topics within the core course were to be wide ranging and challenging. They were in order:

1. The Origins of Western Traditions and Attitudes
2. The Significance of the Renaissance
3. The Dawnings of Modern Political Thinking
4. The Impact of Philosophical Scepticism
5. Industrial Revolution: Its Economic and Ideological Implications
6. The World of Dickens
7. The Psychological Revolution
8. Modern Socio-Economic Organisation
9. Re-Assessing Values – The Environment and the Quality of Life
10. Communicating

Society and Humanity/Political Man was interdisciplinary in a fashion rarely seen at the time. It contained topics on classical, medieval and modern history, politics and literary analysis. It was indeed a crash course in canonical and foundational Western knowledge as it was seen at the time. The curriculum of the Open Foundation thus reflected (and sought to contest through critical thinking) not only 'what count[ed] as valid knowledge' (Bernstein, 1973, in Braslavsky, 2003: 2) in Australian universities, but was itself a product of historical, sociological, political and educational discourse. Smith wanted to offer adult students an adult academic course that privileged their interest as a guiding factor in learning and teaching.

For example, the final examination allowed a great deal of choice for students to hone their knowledge and interest in particular areas. The examination in 'Political Man' was three hours in length. Students were required to answer four questions, from across the topics. Samples of the fifteen final examination questions from 1976 give some of the flavour of this expansive and ambitious course:

- Section A, Question 5: What features of Late Roman Imperial military organisation conditioned the forms and interrelations of Church and State in the Byzantine Empire?

- Section B, Question 7: Some themes explored in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* have been identified as: "the drift of Germany towards the First World War, the conflict of liberal and totalitarian ideals, the relationship of Life to Art, Art and Society, Love and Death, the meaning of music, and the contrast between the contemplative and the active life." Discuss at least two of these themes, describing how they are interrelated and how they are developed in the course of the novel.
- Section C, Question 14 (b): Discuss the influence of Hobson's theory of Imperialism.

As well as the compulsory course, students were offered the choice of one elective study from a small range of subjects, namely: in 1974, Philosophy, English, Economics and Politics; in 1975, Politics was dropped and Social Enquiry added; and in 1976 Geology and Mathematics were included bringing the subject offerings to seven with Political Man.

The Open Foundation Program was to be staffed by academics in the University and be offered only in the evenings. The staff originally named as involved in lecturing the core course of Society and Humanity were highly qualified and experienced men. They included two full professors (K.R. Dutton, Head of the Department of French and A.M. Ritchie, Head of the Department of Philosophy), two Associate Professors (Dr J.W. Staines from Psychology and Dr A. Herzog from Civil Engineering), three Senior Lecturers (Dr L.E. Fredman from History, Mr N.C. Talbot from English, and Mr E.J. Burke from Commerce), two Lecturers (Dr J.R. Fisher from Economics and Mr R.P. Laidlaw from English) and one Senior Tutor (Mr T.J. Ryan from Classics). Only three out of the ten staff did not have PhDs.

The pedagogy performed by these academics was based on long established university practice of lecture and tutorial. The age of threshold learning outcomes, rubrics and graduate attributes had not yet arrived and the favoured pedagogic style was of the 'Sage on the Stage' where costume and manner were an integral part of the teaching armoury. Classics lecturer, Terry Ryan, recalled that they were exciting times to be teaching and that the staff were 'characters'. He spoke of

Professor of Classics, Godfrey Tanner, who sometimes lectured in the Open Foundation and who always wore his academic gown to lectures and spoke with an upper class British accent even though he was from Brisbane! Ryan himself appeared before his first Open Foundation class in Political Man dressed in:

a paisley coloured kaftan (laughs) that went all the way down to the ankles, thin leather headband, and hair down to my shoulders. ... (laughs) and I wore a pair of leather sandals, and swanned in to start talking about the Greeks and the Romans. So I can still see the whites of their eyes as they sort of widened as this creature came in (laughs) (Ryan Interview, 2013)

And perhaps Brian Smith, who led this stellar array of 'luminaries' as John Collins called them, was the most unusual of all. Collins remembered:

[Brian] was in his element. He was the gang leader. And he played that role to the hilt. He was leading way out in front, and he enjoyed doing that. ... He was always available for students ... He kept no lecture notes whatsoever, and for an hour or so before a lecture he would get a scrap of paper and it might even be the back of something that had something roneoed on it, or a notice, and he would scribble and ... scribble in the smallest writing that would be legible. At that time he wasn't wearing pince-nez, but within a couple of years he was wearing reading glasses and he favoured the pince-nez (laughs). He was this thin, painfully thin man, with a shock of red hair and a grey-red beard, looking not unlike the Man from La Mancha or, not Rumpelstiltskin ... Catweazel! That's right. Yeah. Scribbling away with a tiny cigarette in his mouth, well usually much shorter than the hairs on his moustache and we never understood how he didn't go up in flames (laughs). And, ah, occasionally rubbing his hand through his hair, pushing his shock of hair back, which would fall over his face, and scribbling away and puffing away and then rushing off (Collins Interview, 2013).

A former 1976 Open Foundation student recalled how all of this flamboyance affected her:

And I remember being quite overawed in Political Man when I

realized we had a Professor who was teaching us. And I thought “That’s amazing, fancy a Professor coming and teaching us, and particularly me, when I don’t know anything”. (Cowan Interview, 2013)

She remembered that Classics Professor Godfrey Tanner ‘had this amazing knowledge’, but that his Political Man lectures seemed like that they were in some sort of code:

What am I supposed to write down, what was it I was supposed to write down? Do I write everything down? Do I write nothing down? How can you listen, how can you take it down. And then after a time I realized that when Godfrey sort of leapt up and got to the board and picked up a bit of chalk and wrote a name or wrote a few things down, that was your central point. You had to write that down. And it was like cracking a code, it’s like there was a code into this sort of wealth of knowledge and how did you sort of crack the code? And it was like they [the lecturers] knew so much, and it was like what’s the pathway into this huge hall of knowledge that they seemed to be able to access at any point in time, all of this classical history.

She sought the help of librarians and instituted a program of reading so that she could build her knowledge. Her memory inscribes her admiration for her teachers:

And so you’d get a different lecturer coming in, and he’d have a different body of knowledge and he’d be telling you about a different part of ancient history. But they’d be drilling down into, it was almost like they were going down into a vault and pulling out sort of ancient tomes, as though they’d almost been there or time travelled, and been there and then they’d brought it back, were coming back to tell you about these time travels, but there were books on it. And so the books gave you some insight. But it was like they were privy to some knowledge that I’d never had, and it was intriguing.

Today such ‘intrigue’ and opacity and the theatre of teacher-centred classrooms would be judged more harshly.

Open Foundation students attended two evenings per week for about two hours. They had lectures and tutorials. As far as assessment went, they had guided readings and some written assignments including two essays and numerous tutorial papers. At the start it was envisaged that there would be no examinations in the Open Foundation 'but lecturers and tutors will be asked at the conclusion of the course to give an assessment of each student's potentialities' (Smith, 1974). This was quickly overturned and in 1975 all Open Foundation students sat a final examination – and have done ever since.

The pedagogy of assessment was carefully thought out. In 1976 Brian Smith reported to the University's Admissions Committee that assessments had commenced and that in each subject regular assignments and/or tests made it possible to build 'a student achievement record throughout the year'. In the final examinations, all assessments were marked by the staff member who taught the subject and set the questions. Further, all markers marked to a 50% pass mark and at first year undergraduate level. In most instances the 50% continuous and 50% examination scores were, Smith commented, effectively commensurate. In the few cases, however, where the examinations mark was markedly lower than the other, he said that this was usually due to 'the candidate's inexperience in working under time-pressure' of the examination (Smith 1977).

### **Access and Success**

What types of students accessed the first three years of the Open Foundation and how successful were they in their courses? Some of the details of the eighty students who completed the 1974 Pilot have been preserved. Their average age was just over 36 years. They mainly possessed third year high school qualifications, while a very few had completed high school (four in Australia, and one in Malaya). At the conclusion of the course, the Director with assistance from the teaching staff, rated each student's ability to succeed at University study in either Arts or Economics and Commerce degrees to which they were restricted, and each student had a comment recorded against their name. For one student, the Director wrote: 'Regular Attendance, has imagination and balance, some lack of rigour. Literature Essay 68%. A "safe" undergraduate student.' This student went on to an Arts Degree

and recorded two passes in their first undergraduate year, vindicating Dr Smith's judgement. Notes for another student to the effect that the person not only regularly attended but that he was the 'Brightest of his group in discussion. Very good written work. One of the best. Highly recommended', also proved prescient when the student achieved High/Distinctions in Psychology 1 and 2B, the only one of his Open Foundation cohort to achieve this level of performance. One person recommended with comments such as – 'Exceptionally keen and lively in discussion but tends to be dogmatic. Writes very fluently. Two essays indicate University standard; no shortage of ideas but needs to organise them better. Recommended' – failed in their first year studies (OFP Results, 1974).

The 1974 cohort enabled a taxonomy of final rankings of students at the end of the Open Foundation to be created which were used in the subsequent years under review here. These rankings were based on a complicated formula consisting of rankings in the compulsory course Political Man added to the rankings in each elective course to give a final ranking of all students. These rankings were then divided into subgroups so that students' likelihood of success in their degree studies could be calibrated as:

- Predictably very successful at University
- Predictably 'safe' to pass degree requirements
- Would strongly recommend admission
- Would not recommend admission

We know a little more about the 1975 cohort because Smith analysed their performance quite closely based on variables of sex, age and economic class. Their average age was 37 years. He found that the older students, over 40 years, from 'white collar' backgrounds tended to complete at a higher rate than others. Females performed slightly better than males (Smith, 1976). Of those who went into the university almost all took an Arts Degree, with four only choosing Economics and Commerce. There is very little data available on the much larger 1976 cohort as a group but we do know that individuals made the most of the opportunity afforded by the program. For example, Dr Cowan went on to take her doctorate and become a lecturer in the Open Foundation Social Enquiry course for many years and another student became a

lecturer in Sociology while at least two others completed their degree programs.

### **Support, Retention and Performance in Degrees**

While Brian Smith's idea that adults would be admitted to the Open Foundation with no prerequisites, it was by no means assured as the pilot ran in 1974, that successful students who were deemed university material would actually gain access to degree studies. The Board of Community Programs had given permission for the pilot to run even as there were misgivings in the University about granting such access from the start. Early lecturer and later Director of Community Programs, John Collins, recalled:

The University of Newcastle was not quite so (laughs) so keen on the 'rabble'. And there was enormous resistance to the establishment of the Open Foundation Course at the time. And ... the Vice Chancellor at the time, kept delaying decisions that Brian had been asking him to make about whether or not the students, at the end of the course, would be allowed access, or entry, to the University (Collins, 2012).

Indeed, by the July Board meeting in 1974, Smith reported that he had 'some misgivings that entrants could be given no idea of whether the program would lead them to provisional admission to degree courses.' He said that to divorce the course from possible admission was to undercut its purpose. He suggested that, in order to assuage the Board's concerns, the course be made 'examination- oriented in liaison with the Departments concerned.' It is clear that Brian Smith's arguments were heeded because thirty people of the pilot class of the original 80 admitted to the Open Foundation in 1974 were offered places in degree studies in 1975. Twenty-four accepted places: five in Economics and Commerce and nineteen in Arts. Six withdrew from their studies and one failed to sit final exams. The remaining seventeen students sat a total of twenty-nine examination units and they collectively achieved three Fails, nine Credits, two Distinctions and one High Distinction. Smith observed that the failure rate was 10% and that this compared favourably with the first year failure rate of 16% (Smith, 1976).

Furthermore, in his report on the 1976 cohort, which had risen to 160

with the removal of the 80 quota of the first two years, Director Smith commented that people tended to self-select regarding their fitness for university study. He wrote:

The style and manner of the course is such that people who are unlikely to be suitable University students tend to fall away during the course of the year. It is not surprising, therefore, that a very high proportion of those who go the full distance are in fact suitable people to continue tertiary studies (Smith, 1976).

Table 2 below shows the results of research in the available records for the first three years of operation of the program. It reveals that, after the pilot, just over 55% of students who started the Open Foundation in the first two years, finished the program. In terms of outcomes, over 90% of those who finished achieved university places.

**Table 2:** *The First Three Years of the Open Foundation - Numbers on Access, Retention, and University Admission*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Initial student number</b>	<b>Finishing student number with % retention</b>	<b>Student number admitted to university with % success rate</b>
1974	80 (quota)	30 (30/80 or 37.5%)	27 (3 to other unis) (27/30 or 90%)
1975	80 (quota)	45 (45/80 or 56%)	42 (42/45 or 93%)
1976	160 (no quota)	92 (92/160 or 57.5%)	85 (85/92 or 92%)

While the structure of the Open Foundation Program fundamentally stayed the same over the ensuing years despite some experimentation, it did grow in size and number of courses offered in it. In 1976 the quota of 80 students was removed and the program doubled that year, a harbinger of later demand. In that year also the compulsory course was abandoned and students could thenceforth take any two courses they wished. In 1977 Smith argued long and hard – and successfully – to have the definition of ‘mature-age’ for admission to the Open Foundation reduced from 25 to 23 years (today it is 20 years). Finally Smith

experimented with the Open Foundation by radio broadcast in 1978.

John Collins recalled that Brian Smith was ‘always very nervous about the Open Foundation Course’ (Collins Interview, 2012). Smith thought that it wouldn’t last long and that Newcastle was too small a place to support it over the long term. Brian Smith needn’t have worried. Over the years demand for the Open Foundation has grown dramatically. In 2012 over 2,000 people enrolled in the program. How can we account for this longevity and growth? We argue that a part of the answer lies in the original ‘open’ conception and university style of the program.

## **Conclusion**

The Open Foundation was as ‘open’ as Brian Smith could make it and the University at the time could tolerate. Adults could try their hand at university with no requirements and no repercussions. They were to be treated with respect as exemplified by the serious quality of the curriculum which facilitated their choice of topics while testing them rigorously. However they were not swamped by quantity of attendance so that their busy adult lives could be accommodated. Adults in Smith’s view self-selected in and self-selected out. Nevertheless the retention rates after the pilot year showed that the students who stayed in, almost without exception, were capable of university level study.

The features of the Open Foundation Program in these early years have enabled it to flourish for forty years with little overt change in its basic structure. The tertiary-level curriculum was conceptualised as a ‘taster menu’ for degree studies: it was taught by university academics; the pedagogy was based on the lecture and tutorial; and assessment was essay and examination based. This structure proved durable and acted as a sound preparation for the undergraduate studies it mirrored.

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> The Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme set three categories of full-time training for ex service personnel, the first of which was ‘professional training—at a university, technical college, teachers’ college, agricultural college leading to a degree, diploma or equivalent’. The other two categories were vocational training and rural training. While most underwent vocational training, 15,000 ex-

service men and women completed diploma and degree studies out of the 270,000 returned Australians who received some training out of the scheme.

- <sup>2</sup> The universities were Macquarie (1964), Newcastle (1965), Flinders (1966), La Trobe (1967), Griffith (1971), Murdoch (1973), Wollongong (1975) and Deakin (1976). (Moodie, 2013).
- <sup>3</sup> Turner commented that the new Department should develop ‘an independent image’ and not be overshadowed by the WEA as had the University of Sydney’s contribution to adult education in the city.
- <sup>4</sup> These geographical markers describe the ‘footprint’ that the University of Newcastle serves including the Hunter Valley, Lake Macquarie and Central Coast regions in New South Wales.
- <sup>5</sup> Smith’s qualifications were BA with First Class Honours (WA), PhD (ANU). His PhD was entitled “An Essay on Memory with Particular reference to the Role of Imagery”. He had been Senior Extension Officer for the University of Western Australia.

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## Learning cities on the move

Peter Kearns  
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*The modern Learning City concept emerged from the work of OECD on lifelong learning with streams of Learning Cities and Educating Cities having much in common but having little contact with each other. While the early development of Learning Cities in the West has not been sustained, the present situation is marked by the dynamic development of Learning Cities in East Asia – especially in China, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan. In this context, the paper discusses the evolution of three generations of Learning Cities since 1992 and speculates on the future. The experience of the first generation is discussed in terms of development in the UK, Germany, Canada, and Australia where initiatives, with some exceptions, have not been sustained. Beijing and Shanghai are discussed as examples of the innovative second generation in East Asia, which is seen as a community relations model in response to the socio-economic transformation of these countries. International interest in Learning Cities has now been enhanced following a major UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities in Beijing in October 2013, which is to be followed by a Second International Conference in Mexico City. The Beijing Conference adopted the Beijing Declaration on Learning Cities supported by a Key Features document. The paper speculates on possible future development post Mexico City, including the situation in Australia,*

which is seen as opening opportunities for innovative initiatives.

**Keywords:** *Learning Cities, Educating Cities, Beijing Declaration on Learning Cities, Key Features of Learning Cities, learning communities*

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One of the most significant recent developments in the search for innovative ways to provide lifelong learning opportunities for all has been the growing international interest in the concept of Learning Cities. This interest has been reflected in the First International Conference on Learning Cities held in Beijing in October 2013 sponsored jointly by UNESCO, the Chinese Government, and the city of Beijing. The PASCAL International Observatory has supported Learning City development since 2011 through its PIE and Networks programs. A Second UNESCO International Conference is to be held in Mexico City. While the Learning City approach has been growing rapidly in East Asia – especially in China, Republic of Korea, and Taiwan – the situation in the west is more complex with an early flourishing in countries such as the UK, Germany, and Canada followed by an apparent decline.

With leadership now coming from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in Hamburg, and cities and governments in East Asia, it is timely to consider the future of the Learning City concept, including whether the present activity should be seen as a step towards the vision of a universal learning society articulated by the UNESCO Faure Commission report in 1972. In this context, this paper provides an overview of the development of the Learning City concept through two phases of development in the West and East Asia, and speculates on a possible third phase following the impact of the international conferences in Beijing and Mexico City and the work of PASCAL.

### **Origins of the concept**

While the Learning City idea can be traced back through history (Longworth & Osborne, 2010), the modern concept of a Learning City emerged from the work of OECD on lifelong learning, and then developed in two streams of Learning Cities and Educating Cities with little contact with each other.

OECD work on lifelong learning led to a report titled *City strategies*

for lifelong learning prepared for the Second Congress of Educating Cities held in Gothenburg in November 1992 (OECD, 1992). This report contained portraits of seven cities, including Adelaide, that had taken initiatives to progress lifelong learning opportunities for their citizens.

## **Educating Cities**

The Educating City idea was the first to develop an international organisation with agreed objectives and procedures with the establishment of the International Association of Educating Cities in 1994 with a base in Barcelona, followed by the adoption of the Charter of Educating Cities in 2004 (Messina & Valdes-Cotera, 2013). The article by Messina & Valdes-Cotera in the special 2013 Learning City edition of the *International Review of Education* provides a useful overview of the features of Educating Cities, and their development in Latin America.

While the Messina & Valdes-Cotera article shows that Educating Cities and Learning Cities share much in common in terms of their broad educational and social objectives, there are significant cultural, organisational, and political differences that reflect the geographic location of each stream. The International Association of Educating Cities in 2014 had 478 city members in 37 countries. However, 430 of these were in “Latin” countries — Spain (168), France (128), Portugal (54), Italy (22) and South America (59) (IAEC, 2014). The role of local government councils is central to the work of Educating Cities so that it is not surprising that Educating Cities have taken a close interest in the work of schools reflecting the situation in member countries where local authorities have school responsibilities. A further feature evident in the 2004 Charter is the link to fundamental principles, such as the right to education, set out in United Nations instruments (Messina & Valdes-Cotera, 2013: 428).

## **Gen 1 Learning Cities**

While the history of Educating Cities is well documented with an international organisation and agreed Charter to set directions, the story of the first generation of Learning cities in the West is more one of individual initiatives, considerable diversity in approach, and a pattern of rise and fall that holds the seeds for re-growth in new more broadly based Learning Cities which I call Gen 3 Learning Cities.

I comment below on developments in the UK, Germany, Canada, and Australia to illustrate some of the characteristics of this initial generation of Learning Cities in the West. It was a period where, unlike the situation of Educating Cities, there was before the UNESCO Beijing Conference in October 2013 no broadly agreed charter and set of key features for Learning Cities so that development depended in most cases on individual initiatives with an uncertain guarantee of funding over a sustained period.

Nevertheless, a feature of this initial period was the start of the development of a research base, much of it funded by the European Commission, which is now accessible through a number of data bases resulting from EC projects (Longworth & Osborne, 2010).

Several books by Longworth were influential in articulating the features of learning communities and cities in this initial phases of Learning City development. In 1999 he defined a learning community/city in the following terms.

*A learning community is a city, town or region, which mobilises all its resources in every sector to develop and enrich all its human potential for the fostering of personal growth, the maintenance of social cohesion, and the creation of prosperity.* (Longworth, 1999)

This 1999 statement by Longworth shows how the Learning City concept had evolved from the 1992 OECD focus on lifelong learning to a more complex entwining of individual and community development objectives linked to the creation of prosperity.

Longworth's statement is also interesting in its application to cities, towns, regions, and communities, which are all seen as "learning communities". This recognised that in some countries, such as Australia, these initiatives had usually occurred in rural and regional towns and cities and in suburban components of large cities such as Hume and Melton in Melbourne and Marion in Adelaide.

The story of Learning Cities in the UK, Germany, Canada, and Australia may be taken as illustrating typical features of the impact and outcomes of the initial phase of Learning City development.

An analysis of the UK experience with Learning Cities was undertaken by Hamilton and Jordan in 2010. This may be seen as the rise and fall of Learning Cities in the UK (Hamilton & Jordan, 2011). Around 1999 the UK Learning Cities Network had 50 members with significant cities such as Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, Carlisle, and Dundee as declared Learning Cities (Hamilton & Jordan, 2011: 195-197). However, by 2010 the UK Learning Cities Network had ceased to exist. Hamilton and Jordan comment cautiously in the following terms:

*The high tide of the learning city in the UK may on the surface appear to have passed. However, new models are emerging under the banner of lifelong learning.* (Hamilton & Jordan, 2011: 205)

The caution of Hamilton and Jordan appears justified as new approaches to lifelong learning are appearing in the UK, some data driven, which could see a revival of Learning City ideas in the UK, perhaps in different forms.

The impact of the Learning City/Region concept in Germany tells a somewhat different story with a stronger government role rather than development depending on initiatives by individual cities. Government support took the form of the Learning Regions Promotion of Networks Program, which was funded from 2001 until 2008 with support from the European Union's Social Fund (Reghenzani & Kearns, 2012) After 2008, this program was followed by the Learning on Place program.

By supporting Learning Regions rather than just cities, the German program introduced flexibility and fairly considerable diversity into these shared experiences. The program was the subject of a careful evaluation undertaken throughout its duration by a team from the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich. However, the 2009 full report of this evaluation study is available in German only.

The history of Learning Cities in Canada and Australia adds to the diversity of experience in this initial phase of Learning City development in the West, with the Canadian situation having much in common with the UK while Australia took a different path.

Lifelong learning in Canada received a considerable boost from a government decision, following consultations across Canada in 2002,

to fund a Canadian Council on Learning to promote lifelong learning across Canada. The Council was funded until 2010 when government funding ceased and the Council ceased operation. During its short life the Council sponsored considerable innovation, such as its Composite Learning Index which was applied to communities across Canada annually up to 2010 to measure progress in creating Canada as a country of learning communities (Cappon & Laughlin, 2013). During this heyday of lifelong learning in Canada, Learning Cities were established in Vancouver and Victoria. An overview paper on the Learning City policies in Vancouver is available in the PASCAL PIE stimulus papers, which are discussed below (<http://pie.pascalobservatory.org>). Like the UK situation, by 2013 both the Vancouver and Victoria initiatives had discontinued largely because of a lack of funding.

The history of learning communities in Australia turns on individual initiatives with limited support from governments. Most initiatives that have been sustained have been in suburban components of the metropolitan cities such as Hume, Melton, and Marion, or in rural and regional areas such as Gwydir In New South Wales and Townsville so that the term learning community is more common in Australia than learning city. The Australian Learning Community Network has done much with limited resources to sustain the initiatives that exist (<http://lcc.edu.au>). There is a limited literature on the history of learning communities in Australia. An unpublished 2011 paper by Kearns, commissioned for a Taipei International Conference on Learning Cities, comments on Australian Learning City policy and development up to 2010 (Kearns, 2011).

### **PIE as a transition initiative**

The Pascal International Exchanges (PIE) was implemented by the PASCAL International Observatory to promote online exchanges of information and experience between cities around the world. Overview stimulus papers were prepared for 22 cities around the world, including Beijing and Shanghai, which are discussed below. All PIE stimulus papers may be read on the PIE web site (<http://pie.pascalobservatory.org>).

While PIE in its origins in 2010 and 2011 reflected the ideas on Learning Cities we have termed Gen 1, the subsequent impact of East

Asian Learning Cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei) influenced PASCAL ideas about Learning Cities and initiated a journey towards what I have termed Gen 3 Learning Cities reflected, in particular, by PASCAL work on building more holistic and integrated policies for sustainable Learning Cities that we have termed EcCoWell (see the EcCoWell clarifying paper in the PIE papers, <http://pie.pascalobservatory.org/pascalnow/blogentry>). There is a paper on the PIE experience during 2011 to 2013 by the author of this article in the March 2015 issue of the *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* (Vol 20 No 2).

## **Gen 2 in East Asia**

A second generation of Learning Cities developed in East Asia – particularly in China, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan – with characteristics significantly different to cities in the initial generation of development in the West. And also usually in much larger cities. While there is considerable strength in the East Asian model, whether this approach is exportable to countries outside the region is doubtful.

This generation of Learning Cities has demonstrated that the Learning City approach can be successfully implemented and sustained in cities as large as Shanghai, with forms of partnership and governance not found in the West up to now, with a strong research base, with a supportive cultural heritage, and with social objectives linked to the rapid socio-economic transformation of these countries.

A significant feature of the model found in China and Taipei is that development occurs at three levels: the local neighbourhood, the administrative district, and the city overall. Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Beijing are usually divided into 16 to 18 administrative districts so that the district serves as a connector between the neighbourhood and the city. It is of interest that this tripartite division in a city corresponds to the ideas of the American urbanist Jane Jacobs who asserted that cities required three kinds of neighbourhoods which supplemented each other in a complex manner: the city as a whole, street neighbourhoods, and districts of large sub-city size (Jacobs, 1992: 117-132). Chinese Learning Cities correspond to this model which perhaps is a necessary condition in large cities, and which was missing from Gen 1 Learning Cities in the West.

Overviews of the development of the Beijing and Shanghai Learning Cities are available on the PASCAL PIE web site, and may be taken as typical exemplars of Gen 2 Learning Cities in East Asia (Yuan 2012; Huang 2013).

The Beijing Learning City developed in several stages from 2000 when proposals for building learning enterprises were formulated by a group of five government departments which in 2007 became proposals for “the construction of the learning capital city” (Yuan, 2012: 2).

This initiative developed at the three levels as discussed above with community education networks led by community colleges and adult education centres. By 2012 80 percent of the streets in Beijing had established community education centres or learning learning centres (Yuan, 2012). In most districts and centres, school teachers were asked to go into local neighbourhoods and assist in the development of community education (Yuan, 2012: 3).

The broad nature of the approach adopted in Beijing extended to enterprises with a series of policies to support the development of learning organisations, including incentive awards and evaluation studies and outcomes. There is a strong research contribution to the Beijing Learning City that is focussed on the Beijing Institute for the Learning Society (BILS) located within the Beijing Normal University, which draws upon the resources of universities located in Beijing. In addition to supporting the Beijing Learning City, the Institute aims to “enrich and develop the theory of building a learning society with Chinese characteristics” (BILS 2013: 1). A 2013 research report on a *BILS Survey on adult competencies for lifelong learning in Beijing* illustrates the BILS research effort in supporting the Beijing Learning City.

The rapid economic growth of Shanghai with a growing demand for skilled workers, which was above 5 percent annually, and with the social consequences of this growth requiring attention, led to the Shanghai Learning City initiative. While the original stimulus for this initiative was economic, the Shanghai Learning City initiative has evolved in directions that give more attention to community relations and allied social objectives.

As in Beijing, development has occurred at three levels. Co-ordination of effort is being achieved through the Shanghai Municipal Committee on Building a Learning Society established by the Shanghai Municipal Government in 2006, which works with a number of related bodies including the Shanghai Municipal Committee on Spiritual Civilization, Municipal Commission of Science and Technology and others (Huang, 2013: 3).

Again like Beijing, a strong research effort has been built into development of the Shanghai Learning City. The Shanghai Municipal Institute for Lifelong Education (SMILE) was established jointly by the Shanghai Municipal Education Committee and the East China Normal University as a think tank for Shanghai development as a Learning City. An impressive 254 page report titled Shanghai Development Report of Lifelong Education was prepared for an international conference in 2013 which reviewed the progress of the Shanghai Learning City (SMILE, 2013). This report reflects the evolving phases of Shanghai's development as a Learning City from its initial focus on the economic functions of lifelong education to sustaining "the vigorous and harmonious development of society" (SMILE, 2013: 233).

Huang reflects this evolution in her comment:

*The achievement of building a learning society should not only reflect in the aspect of the economic miracle, but more importantly also reflect in shaping the city's spirit, improving life quality for all, and gaining overall sound development.* (Huang, 2013: 5)

Similar views were expressed by Han and Makino in a comparative analysis of *Learning Cities in East Asia: Japan, the Republic of Korea, and China* prepared for the special Learning Cities edition of the *International Review of Education*. (Han & Makino 2013: 443-468)

*We believe that the distinctive feature of the Asian type of learning cities can be characterised as a community relations model which is different to the European individual competence model ..... in the sense that learning is fundamentally an individual process* (Han & Makino, 2013: 445).

It is easy to understand why countries, such as China and Korea, undergoing the dislocation of rapid socio-economic transformation

should come to focus on social aspects of building Learning Cities with community relations directed at building a “harmonious society” to the fore. The distinction made by Han and Makino can be seen as largely, although not entirely, defining the distinction between what I have called Gen 1 and Gen 2 Learning Cities.

The question that arises from this situation is whether ways can be found to transform and revive Learning Cities in the West in sustainable ways, while also extending Learning Cities to areas without coverage and so progressing towards a universal learning society, the vision of the 1972 UNESCO Faure Commission report (UNESCO, 1972). I comment on this question below in the light of developments during 2013 to 2015, which could possibly transform the situation of Learning Cities around the world.

### **Towards Gen 3 Learning Cities**

The Learning City concept has been given a considerable boost by a number of events during the period 2013 to 2015, which in their cumulative impact, suggest that a new era in Learning City development could be emerging, which may perhaps provide a pathway towards a universal learning society.

These events include the First International Conference on Learning Cities in Beijing in October 2013 followed by a Second International Conference in Mexico City. The Beijing Conference led to a Beijing Declaration on Learning Cities supported by a Key Features document. In addition, a number of case studies have been prepared to show the Key Features in particular contexts.

Leadership in these developments has been undertaken by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) located in Hamburg. The PASCAL International Observatory has supported these developments through its PIE program until the end of 2013, followed by the successor Learning Cities 2020 Networks program which explores selected aspects of Learning City development.

To support the Beijing Conference, a special issue of the UNESCO *International Review of Education* was prepared with articles on selected developments around the world (Osborne, Kearns & Yang

2013). While the articles reflect progress in some areas, such as in East Asia and in evaluation strategies, they also show the difficulties and limited progress in places such as Africa (Biao, Eseate & Oonyu, 2013). Inclusion of an article on Educating Cities in Latin America was a particular feature, reminding readers of the two streams of parallel developments existing around the world (Messina & Valdes-Cotera, 2013).

The Beijing Declaration on Learning Cities and the Key Features document may be read on the UIL website (<http://uil.unesco.org>), and are contained in the report of the Beijing conference (UIL, 2014: 23-36). The Beijing Declaration provides a broad charter for Learning Cities around the concepts of individual empowerment, building cohesive communities, and achieving sustainability. The Declaration broadens the usual Gen 1 concept of a Learning City with the sustainability aspect of the Declaration reaching out to economic development, cultural prosperity, and the natural environment. This view is supported by a firm statement that “learning communities, learning cities, and learning regions are pillars of sustainable development” (UIL, 2014: 23) The Key Features document elaborates on aspects of the Declaration by suggesting possible measures and sources of data (UIL, 2014: 27).

While the Beijing Declaration recognises that cities differ in their cultural and ethnic composition, heritage, and social structures, a key question will be how the Declaration is implemented in a range of diverse contexts so that diversity adds value to the concepts of the Declaration. The approach to “cultural prosperity” in a range of contexts will be a good test of this aspect. The case studies being prepared for a number of cities, including both Beijing and Cork, may help to clarify the spectrum of questions thrown up by implementation of the Beijing Declaration.

## **Benefits**

The Beijing Declaration cited a number of individual and community benefits of Learning Cities, including social, economic, and cultural benefits (UIL, 2014: 23). Preisinger-Kleine supports this view drawing on experience from projects supported by the European Commission.

*A substantial body of literature emphasises the major role of*

*learning cities and regions within knowledge-based societies, appraising them as incubators of creativity and innovation* (Preisinger-Kleine, 2013: 522).

### **Towards a universal learning society?**

The UNESCO Faure Commission report of 1972 advocated the concept of a learning society with the relationship between education and society changing fundamentally.

*In this light, tomorrow's education must form a co-ordinated totality in which all sectors of society are structurally integrated. It will be universalized and continual. From the point of view of individual people, it will be total and creative, and consequently individualized and self-directed. It will be the bulwark and the driving force in culture, as well as in promoting professional activity. This movement is irresistible and irreversible. It is the cultural revolution of our time* (UNESCO, 1972: 165).

While the subsequent UNESCO Delors Commission of 1996 endorsed this concept (UNESCO, 1996: 24) and it has been taken up in more recent times by Cisco Systems in a White Paper on the Learning Society (Cisco Systems, 2010), the question remains whether this is only a utopian vision divorced from reality.

On the other hand, the world has fundamentally changed since the Faure report of 1972. The impact of globalisation, rampant urbanisation, and the scientific and technological revolutions have created a world of global economic interdependence and, for some, a sense that a new global civilization is emerging to follow “the logic of one world” (Mahbubani, 2013). Whether this is the humanistic civilization long advocated by UNESCO and others, hangs in the balance.

Viewed in the broad sweep of history, the evolution of ideas of Learning Cities and Educating Cities since 1992 can be seen as tentative steps towards the ideal of a universal learning society articulated by the Faure Commission in their report. The Beijing conference documents by charting a broad concept of sustainable Learning Cities provides a platform for further steps in moving forward.

While Gen 1 Learning Cities were European in their orientation and Gen 2 reflected their East Asian environment, the emerging Gen 3 Learning Cities will be fully international in drawing on ideas and experience from anywhere, and in addressing the big global issues confronting cities around the world.

Of course, much remains to be done. This includes extending cover of Learning Cities and Educating Cities to the large parts of the world where they do not exist, including Africa and much of Asia. A particular need exists in extending access in rural areas in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere, including exploring the potential of the Learning Region concept in fostering innovative forms of partnership in rural and regional areas.

### **And what of Australia?**

While a number of learning communities have existed in parts of Australia back to 1999, and the Australian Learning Communities Network has striven since 2000 to promote this concept, the Learning City concept has failed to be taken up by any of the large metropolitan cities of Australia, and Australia was not represented at the Beijing conference. This suggests a lack of awareness by policy makers in state and federal governments, unlike the situation in countries such as China and Korea.

Initiatives that have been sustained have been in suburban areas of state capitals such as Hume, Melton, and Marion, and in rural and regional communities such as Gwydir and Townsville. Whether the international initiatives in Beijing and Mexico City will change this situation remains to be seen. What happens in Australia will be a good test case of whether Learning Cities in the West will now experience a resurgence in the emerging international context discussed in this paper.

In a context marked by financial pressures on governments for restraint, and with the welfare state under challenge in many places, there are good reasons to harness the human and other resources that exist in communities in creative ways that build partnership, a civic culture of community service, and a learning culture that both adds to the quality of life and well-being of residents in cities, and their capacity for learning throughout life for economic, social, and cultural reasons.

In addition, the resurgence of Learning Cities in China, Korea, and Taiwan creates opportunities for Australian cities to develop educational and cultural relations with Asian cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing, and Taipei that will have long-term benefits in “the Asian century”. The time is ripe for creative innovations.

Of course, the East Asian model does not easily translate to Australian cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide, which have divided powers and responsibilities between a small city area focussed around the central business district and a fairly large number of councils covering suburban areas where most of the population live. Brisbane is different with Brisbane City Council covering large suburban areas as well as the central business district.

The challenge now for governments is to develop an Australian model that will receive recognition around the world and, importantly in the countries of East Asia, and add to the recognition of Australia as a country that has pioneered much social innovation throughout our history.

This optimistic message was echoed by Osborne, Kearns, and Yang in their introduction to the Learning City special issue of the UNESCO *International Review of Education*.

*While the barriers and challenges to be met and overcome in progressing learning cities are well articulated in this special issue, the dominant message that emerges is an optimistic one. It points to a strengthened international discourse on learning cities, seen as a catalyst to a revitalised humanism and civic awakening, and as a path towards a universal and humane learning society (Osborne, Kearns & Yang, 2013: 420).*

Learning Cities are indeed on the move.

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**Book Review**

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**Teaching International Students in Vocational  
Education:  
New Pedagogical Approaches**

Ly Thi Tran,  
ACER Press, Camberwell, Victoria, Australia, 2013

Reviewed by Jonathan Tyner

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Dr. Ly Thi Tran is a Senior Lecturer at Deakin University in the School of Education at Melbourne. Her research areas of interest include international education, intercultural learning, staff professional development and student mobility. She received funding from the Australian Research Council to conduct research on international students and their experiences with vocational education.

In her new book, *Teaching International Students in Vocational Education: New pedagogical approaches*, she writes about the impact of the Asian Century in Australia and how the influx of international students seeking education has changed the dynamic of vocational education. This change has affected the traditional vocational education culture by contributing to internationalisation and the need for

preparing all students, international and domestic, with skills that would enable global student and citizen mobility.

Currently the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sectors mandate competency-based education and training packages that define the industry standards for vocational education. Consequently, VET teachers have difficulty satisfying the compliance requirements of the training packages and adapting their courses in ways that would accommodate diverse student populations. Moreover, present VET standards are not meeting the international students' needs as well as neglecting to prepare domestic students for international work outside of Australia. Therefore, the author's focus of the book was to advocate for reciprocal adaptation through evaluating current pedagogical approaches. Moreover, the author mentions that it should be the teacher or training organisation's responsibility to adapt current pedagogy rather than assuming that the students must conform to the teachers' preferred practice and Western education style.

Despite the book's title and emphasis on vocational education in Australia, adult educators who teach international students, or domestic students interested in working in a foreign country, would benefit from this book. The author introduces nine teaching approaches that prove to be beneficial to even the experienced teacher. Throughout each chapter, the fundamental focus is on pedagogical adaptation, cultural inclusivity and student-centeredness.

First, pedagogical adaptation is the need to recontextualise pedagogy so that it includes international content, which would better support internationalisation. For instance, the author illustrates pedagogical adaptation by providing actual quotes from teachers who have benefitted from adapting their teaching methods. Moreover, adapting pedagogy is necessary because conventional education does not provide adequate learning or teaching methods that would accommodate a diverse international student population. In addition, Howard Gardner (1993) discusses the importance of multiple intelligences, which explains that not all learners learn in the same manner and the importance to incorporate a variety of learning methods. Similarly, the author describes a variety of approaches that illustrate methods for teachers to use when teaching international students. The author explains that

the current training packages for VET teachers are prescribed but need to become flexible not only for international students' sake but also for domestic students seeking work outside of Australia.

Second, reciprocal learning is suggested in helping to establish a more culturally inclusive environment where international students' voices are appreciated and valued. Reciprocal learning refers to the ideal learning environment where the instructor and students learn from one another. Moreover, the instructor learns how to incorporate an international student's formal and experiential knowledge into the curriculum for all students to benefit.

Unfortunately, many VET programs do not utilise or recognise international students' cultural knowledge, perspectives or prior experience. Furthermore, international students possess knowledge that Moll et al. (1992) refer to as the funds of knowledge. Tran explains that by integrating international students' knowledge from their home country into the VET programs, reciprocal learning can occur. Therefore, teachers and domestic students will effectively benefit from international students' funds of knowledge by learning new global perspectives in regards to vocational education. Consequently, by adopting culturally inclusive practices, international students can proudly share their cultural practices in a safe and stimulating learning environment.

Lastly, the author explains the need to shift VET models away from the notion that students seeking education in Australia do so because the vocational education system is superior. In other words, students are no longer seeking a superior education model but rather an internationalised education model that would prepare students for work in a global market. Students wish to learn transferrable skills that would provide them mobility within a field as well as mobility in job markets around the world. In order to stay competitive with international education, VET programs must understand their students' needs and construct training packages that would prepare students for life beyond work.

This book was written with practical application in mind. The teacher interviews provide the illustration that would inspire any educator to reevaluate their current pedagogy. However, since the book emphasises

understanding the needs of international students, readers would have benefitted from current vocational students input had it been incorporated into the book. International student input would provide a perspective that is missing from this book. Although interviews from current teachers are useful, student perspective on challenges with current VET pedagogy and difficulty with teachers who are reluctant to acknowledge international students' cultural knowledge would have also been beneficial for the reader.

Overall, Tran provides an inspirational book with immediate practical application that is not limited to vocational education settings. Due to internationalisation, all adult educators should make a point to understand their students' needs by adapting pedagogy appropriately and creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. This book would be a great start for any adult educator that is looking to enhance the classroom experience for international students.

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