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Cover Page Footnote

Service providers and service users are generic terms used for convenience and cover a diverse range of individuals who may be recruited by students as participants in their studies.

Exploring the Potential for Transformative Learning through Critical Reflection for Undergraduate Students of Applied Social Sciences undertaking Final Year Research Projects

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Abstract

This small-scale qualitative study investigated the potential for transformative learning through critical reflection for students of Applied Social Sciences undertaking final year research projects. Literature related to transformative learning and critical reflection underpinned the study. Seven lecturers experienced in undergraduate research supervision from one campus in a Technological University were interviewed, reflecting a case study and Action Research approach. Key findings were that currently there is some evidence of transformative learning for these undergraduate researchers, but it '*is not a given*' and examples of missed opportunities at each stage of the research process were described. Supervisors linked transformative learning to levels of awareness of *self*, of *the other* and of *societal issues* and identified the importance of critical reflection for students becoming aware of their own bias, being open to different perspectives, and comprehending issues of power and inequality. Supervision sessions were seen to provide the opportunity for disorienting dilemmas encountered during the research process to be resolved through *critical thinking* and *discourse*, and to promote a more democratic approach as supervisors and students co-investigate their research topic.

The study was carried out to identify enablers and inhibitors to transformative learning at each stage of the research process with a view to enhancing the experiences of students and their supervisors and inform future practice. It is evident that transformative learning is intrinsically linked to the values of Applied Social Sciences education, in particular issues of social justice, and that embedding it more specifically in undergraduate research would afford an opportunity for students to develop critical thinking skills and become agents of change in their future workplaces.

Keywords: Critical Reflection, Social Sciences, Transformative Learning, Undergraduate Research

Introduction

The final year research project is a requirement for most undergraduate programmes in Social Sciences and has the dual purpose of providing the student with the opportunity to explore an area in which they have a particular interest, and to be initiated into the rigours of academic research, preparing them for possible postgraduate research. Traditional academic research can be challenging for many students on more applied programmes in the Technological University sector, who have had semesters of placements in Years 2 and 3 and fewer academic modules than those on more traditional Social Sciences programmes. There may also be a greater proportion of non-traditional students with less conventional pathways into Higher Education in these cohorts.

This study looks at how a more humanistic approach might make the undergraduate research project more meaningful for students and how the research supervision process might support this. A small-scale qualitative study was carried out to investigate the potential for transformative learning through critical reflection for students undertaking final year research projects. The research draws on the experiences of lecturers involved in the supervision of students on two Applied Social Sciences programmes at a Technological University.

Transformative Learning

For the purpose of this study, Mezirow's description of transformative learning is used:

We transform our taken for granted frames of reference which includes meaning perspectives, habits of mind and mindsets to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, reflective (Mezirow, 2000, p.7).

Mezirow (2000, p.17) defines habits of mind as a set of assumptions, broad generalizations, predispositions, that filter how we interpret the meaning of experience, which become expressed as points of view where feelings, convictions and attitudes can lead to actions not subject to critique. For example, 'being racist, (or ethno-centric) is a habit of mind that has corresponding points of view that may involve being resentful, fearful, suspicious of others from different ethnic backgrounds' (Fleming, 2018, p.122).

While Mezirow has been critiqued for adopting an individualistic approach (Tenant, 2006), his vision is for a society made up of individuals who have been transformed together creating a community which would be:

Cemented by empathic solidarity, committed to the social and political practice of participatory democracy, informed through critical reflection and would collectively take reflective action when necessary, to assure that social systems and local institutions, organisations, and their practices are responsive to the human needs of those they service (Mezirow, 1998, p.72).

While transformative learning was once seen primarily in adult education contexts because of the focus on reflection on lived experience (Mezirow, 2000; Tenant, 2006; Fleming, 2018), it has broadened out to include many different learning contexts. In a recent review of transformative learning, McCain (2024, p.26) notes that transformative learning ‘continues to be a critical and evolving theory, showcasing substantial progress and diversification across nearly five decades’, while Hoggan & Finnegan (2023, p.6) describe it as ‘a “mature,” and broadly-, sometimes fuzzily-, defined area of scholarship and practice’. It remains relevant in the fields of Education and Developmental Psychology in providing a framework for understanding how personal growth and learning can go hand-in-hand.

In the context of students of Applied Social Sciences, transformative learning is closely connected to students becoming more aware of their own positionality in society, issues of social justice and ways to address these, which in turn connects with issues of Human Rights and Sustainable Development Goals. Learning contexts where traditional metaphors related to learning such as ‘acquiring’ or ‘transferring’ knowledge have in recent decades been replaced by more learner centred language with metaphors such as ‘participation’ through experiential learning, ‘construction’ of new ways of seeing the world and ‘becoming’ in terms of experiencing personal change (Hager & Haliday, 2007, p.3). This links transformative learning which focuses on the individual and emancipatory learning focusing on the individual in society which reflects Freire’s concept of ‘conscientization’(Freire, 2006) which is defined as ‘the process of developing a critical consciousness of the social and political forces that shape our lives, and developing the critical thinking skills to challenge injustice and create change’ which leads to ‘a critical awareness of the self as a subject who can reflect and act upon the world in order to transform it’ (Tenant, 2006, p.122).

A key feature of Mezirow’s perspective is that ‘critical reflection’ can be triggered by a ‘disorienting dilemma’ which leads to questioning assumptions, exploring new knowledge, skills and possible actions, and in time, integration as the individual builds ‘competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships’ (Mezirow, 2000, p.22). For transformative

learning to take place, *critical reflection* needs to be paired with *discourse* which is a form of dialogue where participants engage with maturity, empathy and ambivalence – the ability to hold different perspectives - and favour consensus/inclusion over winning or losing (Mezirow, 2000, p.11). In Applied Social Sciences education, encountering or in some cases provoking ‘disorienting dilemmas’ and using these as opportunities for reflection, and through dialogue arriving at a greater and more inclusive understanding of issues may be an important part of pedagogy and research practice. Mezirow’s belief is that the world needs individuals who are more tolerant of difference, self-reflective and capable of engaging in moral discourse and this happens through education:

Direct intervention by the educator to foster the development of the skills, insights, and especially dispositions essential for critical reflection - and self-reflection - on assumptions and effective participation in critical-dialectical discourse (reflective judgment) - essential components of democratic citizenship (Mezirow, 2003, p.62).

This transformative learning perspective is developed by Loxley, Fleming & Finnegan (2017, p.255) in their study on non-traditional students in Higher Education in their contention that while critical reflection is central, ‘For self-understanding to be reached in dialogue, democracy is necessary and for democracy recognition is necessary’ and that ‘teacher-student relationships would involve both parties co-investigating reality and acknowledging the mutuality of the teaching/learning process’. The final year research project should provide an opportunity for a student to carry out a study which draws on their growing understanding of social justice and become more inclusive of different perspectives through *critical reflection* and *discourse* with their supervisor, leading to the development of a vision for more just social practice in their field.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection, seen above to be a pre-requisite for transformative learning, is the other key concept related to this study. Applied Social Sciences programmes have an essential critical reflection piece which underpins the applied nature of the programmes, linking coursework to practice and reflection on their own practice during placement. Brookfield (2016; 2018) sees critical reflection linked to Critical Theory ‘For reflection to be considered critical it must have as its explicit focus the uncovering and challenging of power dynamics that frame our decisions and actions’ (Brookfield, 2016, p.29). This makes it particularly suited to the field of Applied Social Studies.

Brookfield puts forward four lenses for reflective practice which are *our own autobiographies*, *our service users' eyes*, *our colleagues' experiences*, and *theoretical literature*. In undergraduate programmes all of these lenses can be used at different times, and these can come together when carrying out a research project. He emphasizes that critical reflection is essentially a collaborative process: 'We need colleagues, clients, peers and experts to pose questions to us, introduce new ways of looking at practice, and support us through the periods of struggle when challenging dominant assumptions threatens our sense of identity' (Brookfield, 2016, p.34). This reflects Mezirow's concept of a 'disorienting dilemma' triggering *critical reflection* and the need for *discourse* to facilitate the integration of new knowledge and the development of new perspectives.

The research project provides the student with the opportunity to have these interactions by using their own autobiographies as a starting point for reflecting on their own life and learning experiences for selecting a topic; interrogating the literature and expert views contained therein; by carrying out qualitative research with service providers¹ or service users in their field; and by engaging in their supervision sessions with their research supervisor who may have a key role in facilitating transformative learning through scaffolding their *critical reflection* through *discourse*.

Context

Applied Social Sciences programmes in the Technological University sector (formerly the Institute of Technology sector) often attract a diverse student body, coming through both traditional and non-traditional pathways. Many students come through the traditional CAO points-based pathway, however a study on retention noted 'On the whole, points tend to be lower for courses in the IT sector and therefore tend to attract less academically successful students. However, courses requiring lower points are not necessarily easier'. (Moore-Cherry, Quinn & Boroughs, 2015, p.56). Approximately one third of students come through alternative pathways (QQI, 2021, p.15), and students from migrant backgrounds are also well represented on Social Sciences programmes, and where English is not their first language this can impact on achievement in academic modules (Harris & Ni Chonaill, 2016).

¹ *Service providers* and *service users* are generic terms used for convenience and cover a diverse range of individuals who may be recruited by students as participants in their studies.

In a study of learning and teaching of non-traditional students in Higher Education, Loxley, Fleming & Finnegan (2017, p.250) note that lecturers need to beware of using their own academic experience as a reference point and of adopting ‘a deficit model of non-traditional students’ which can be ‘corrosive’. However, they also observe that ‘It appears that staff with a background in the applied so-called soft sciences (which have a broader political interest in equality) are less likely to approach non-traditional students in this way’. They highlight ‘the vulnerabilities that exist alongside an otherwise resilient student body’ (Loxley et al., p.252.) and they advocate for ‘pedagogy and curricula that speak directly to the diverse social and life experiences and needs of non-traditional students’ (Loxley et al., p.250). The inclusion of a transformative learning dimension to the research project may go some way to address some of these identified needs.

The development of critical thinking and a growing awareness of their own positionality in relation to others and society tie in with the values that underpin these programmes which aim to produce graduates who are agents of change in their workplaces. Learning outcomes include ‘Express a comprehensive personalised identity with internalised understanding of human rights and social justice’ (Programme 1) and ‘Express an internalised worldview founded on principles of social justice, equality, participation, empowerment, inclusion, anti-discrimination, dialogue and commitment to collective action for social change’ (Programme 2). The module descriptor for the Dissertation on both programmes notes ‘The teaching and supervision of the student will place particular emphasis on encouraging students to become independent and reflective researchers’ and in the case of Programme 2 engage in ‘research relevant to shaping intervention for positive social change’.

Students on these programmes have an Introduction to Research Methods in Year 3, and throughout Year 4, in addition to lectures on Research Methods, students have a weekly one-to-one supervision session. In the first semester of Year 4 students prepare a research proposal, ethics form and short literature review, and in the second semester they carry out data collection, usually through qualitative semi-structured interviews, and write up their dissertation.

Aims of the Study

The key aim of this study is to look at ways of making the undergraduate research project more meaningful for students and lecturers which emerged as an issue at programme board level, and to consider the types of conversations that can happen during undergraduate research supervision which may promote critical reflection and transformation for students.

The study seeks to explore the potential for Transformative Learning through Critical Reflection for undergraduate students of Applied Social Sciences and sets out to identify key features of Transformative Learning and critical reflection which are particularly applicable to students of applied social studies; to investigate supervisors' understanding of Transformative Learning in the context of these programmes; to examine the engagement of students at each stage of the undergraduate supervision process, identifying enablers and inhibitors to transformative learning and critical reflection; and to consider implications for practice.

Methodology

This small-scale qualitative study arose from discussions between the researcher and colleagues about the very varying levels of engagement of students in the Year 4 undergraduate research project on two Applied Social Sciences programmes. Many lecturers teach and supervise across both programmes and separating their experience by programme would not have been useful or feasible. The sample was opportunistic as interested colleagues were recruited, but also purposive (Mukherji & Albon, 2018) as criteria for taking part in the research included at least two years of lecturing and at least two years' experience of supervising undergraduate research on one or both of the programmes. None of the participants had any particular knowledge of Transformative Learning at the outset of the study.

Given that the participants were all colleagues working on the same campus, the research design reflected a case study approach (Hamilton, 2011) and had elements of Action Research insofar as it involved the participation of educators who were seen as collaborators in the research rather than the object of the research. 'Contrary to many research paradigms, action research works *with*, rather than *on* or *for*, the "researched", and is therefore often seen as embodying democratic principles' (O'Leary, 2017, p.354). While this study only represents the first part of an Action Research Cycle, it fits well within this paradigm: 'The main role of action research is to facilitate practitioners to study aspects of practice - whether it is in the

context of introducing an innovative idea or in assessing and reflecting on the effectiveness of existing practice, with the view of improving practice' (Koshy, 2006, p.xii).

A research proposal was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University and participants filled in consent forms which allowed the researcher to not only collect the views of participants for internal programme board purposes but to also disseminate and publish findings. Data collection was carried out through 30-minute interviews with seven lecturers (three males and four females) using Microsoft Teams which also provided a transcription of the interviews. For purposes of anonymity, a profile of individual participants is not provided as they may be easily identified in a relatively small sector.

Semi-structured interviews (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018) focused on participants' understandings of transformative learning as a concept and how it is embedded in the programmes they lecture on, and on their experiences of supervising students' research projects, identifying opportunities for transformative learning at each stage of the research project.

An inductive approach was taken to the analysis of participants' understandings of transformative learning and following thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) three main themes emerged. A more deductive approach was taken to the analysis of participants' experiences of undergraduate supervision as questions focused on enablers and inhibitors at each stage of the research project and these provided the themes for this section.

In terms of limitations, this study involves a small number of participants from a single campus with a traditional approach to undergraduate research. As the participants were self-selected, it is likely that the topic of transformative learning resonated with them, and they had an interest in exploring this area. Other experienced supervisors declined to take part in the study and their views are not represented here.

This study does not include the voice of students. In a previous study (Harris, 2014) which focused on the experiences of transformative learning of Year 3 students from a student perspective, students reported placement and interaction with peers most likely to bring about transformation, while engaging with course notes and readings least likely. Interaction with lecturers was seen to have only a moderate effect. One of the conclusions of the study was that

students may under-estimate the contribution of coursework and lecturer input as foundational aspects of learning which later allow for transformative experiences with peers and on placement. Nonetheless capturing the perspective of the student on opportunities for transformative learning during the research project would be an important area for further research to complement this study.

Findings

This section initially outlines supervisors' understanding of transformative learning and then provides an overview of the views of supervisors regarding enablers and inhibitors to transformative learning at each stage of the research project, starting with the choice of topic, then considering the literature review chapter, the methodology chapter and data collection, and finally the findings, discussion and conclusion chapters.

Understanding of Transformative Learning

The previously cited definition of transformative learning as put forward by Mezirow (2000) was provided to the supervisors who were participants in the study as a starting point, and they expanded on their understanding of what this entails in the context of the programmes they are involved with. Three main areas for transformation emerged: *Awareness of self*; *awareness of the other*; and *awareness of societal issues*. Critical thinking is threaded through each of these areas: Initially in terms of students' ability to reflect on their own lived experiences and their own positionality, then on the experiences of others and the development of empathy, and finally on wider societal issues through engaging with expert knowledge through readings and lecturer facilitation.

Awareness of self

Some supervisors focus particularly on the individual's transformation as a form of '*personal development*' (P5, P6), which entails '*self-reflection... self-awareness...self-questioning... understanding ourselves*' (P6) and this is further defined as '*how we respond to situations... think about what we stand for... define our own personal values*' (P4). Students need to become '*emotionally capable*' (P3) and through reflection develop resilience: '*being able to reflect on an experience can shift something in your mind ... and believe in something about yourself*' (P5), and an important element in this regard is the development of '*self-esteem*' (P5, P6.)

Awareness of self also entails students understanding issues of *'their own positionality'* (P2, P7) and being able to *'suspend your own pre-conceptions'* (P3), or indeed *'pre-conceptions from family, friends, media'* (P4), *'lots of young people are very limited by the belief system of their area, or their family'* (P5).

Awareness of the 'other'

Awareness of the 'other' is an inter-related aspect which entails the students understanding their own *'bias'* (P6), *'challenging their own stereotypes'* (P4), as one supervisor says *'We all have prejudices in the end of the day, we all get misinformation about people who are different to us'* (P7). This involves adopting a *'charitable perspective'* (P3), *'being open to differing viewpoints, considering different perspectives... having an understanding and empathy for others, which really is critical for humanity'* (P4). This promotes personal development: *'for the individual's development, it's fundamental to understand the other's point of view'* (P6).

Placement is seen by several supervisors to be a key point in their programme when students experience transformative learning: *'I find that it is more personally transformative, they get some deep political or social awakening'* (P1). Another supervisor sees this as an opportunity to link theory to practice: *'I see placement as an "awakening" ... as an opportunity to really understand theories by looking at how they are being implemented'* (P6).

Supervisors describe 'light-bulb moments' citing one student gaining a real insight into food poverty: *"I never got that, that young people could not have food in the cupboard in their homes because I haven't had that experience"* (P2), and another student on placement in an addiction setting developing empathy: *"I was afraid of the people I was going to work with"* and later observing *"they're quite like me, they are not too different"* (P6).

A key point made is that students coming on to a Social Sciences programme need to broaden their perspective on issues of equality and social justice, they may be *'flying their own flag on one particular aspect of inequality... however they themselves in other dimensions of their lives may have power and privilege which they are not necessarily aware of'* (P7). Transformation for such students involves developing *'personal social well-being... empathy and developing and maintaining social relationships... working in solidarity with others, working in collaboration with others'* (P4), and as future practitioners *'understanding the power of a relationship for someone who is having a difficult time'* (P5).

Awareness of Societal Issues

This area for transformation is seen by supervisors to connect some of the students' growing awareness of themselves as agents of change in society with the theory and practice of academic coursework. Several supervisors quote Freire's *'the personal is political'* (P1, P2, P7) to explore how students interact with the structures of society, *'it's the self, but it's the social structures around, and how the self as a practitioner is interacting... to bring about that transformation'* (P7).

One supervisor focuses particularly on this dimension, describing transformative learning as a *'learning process in which people transform their understandings of a particular issue'* (P1).

In this regard pedagogical approaches are important:

'I attempt to get students to look at a particular subject matter from a more politicized perspective... it helps students understand why you have inequalities in society... a space where they can consider more radical alternatives or options to what they will see in the real world' (P1).

Similarly, P2 looks at how students might act in an ideal world of *'participatory democracy, and how transformative learning can add to that, engaged citizens, social cohesion, social dialogue'*. An important point here is that *'the depth of reflection relates to the engagement with the theory'* (P2). This is reiterated by P7, *'part of that transformative learning, it's not just discussing the issues, it's actually that they have frameworks to understand these issues, critique them, and then be able to apply them to practice'*. The social justice dimension is highlighted here in terms of structures of power, P4 notes the importance of considering the viewpoints *'of people who have been historically silenced'*, P7 notes that in any discussion of inequality such as racism, it is important to consider intersectionality with other issues *'look at how it interacts with classism, ableism, sexism, etc.'*

Evidence of Transformative Learning

Supervisors agree that while they have seen evidence of transformative learning in students, it is a tenuous process that happens gradually and can be different for different students:

'I think it's not a given...it takes time, I do see the students first year to fourth year and I do see that transformative piece happening... I think it is something that happens incrementally and that they are scaffolded.' (P7).

'It's a gradual process of generating shifts in perspectives. There's a lot of misunderstandings along the way and then it's about kind of unpicking these

misunderstandings. And I find that to be quite a transformative experience and I think the key ingredient there to be lots of interaction' (P3)

Students may also come on to programmes with varying degrees of readiness for transformative learning:

'Everyone starts their journey from a different space...some students have more lived experience of issues... they now have that language or that discourse to describe their lived experience and can challenge that, and can have the policy analysis to support that as well, but especially on their own positionality' (P2)

As seen above, supervisors were able to identify how their programmes and modules could be transformative which is evident in this observation:

'I think the programme team are continuously considering how to put transformative learning theory into practice...I do think the course provides students with information and resources to think critically about many complex issues...are really given the opportunity to consider how they impact on others, on the world' (P4).

Transformative Learning and Critical Reflection at each Stage of the Research Project

In the following sections each stage of the research project is looked at, starting with the choice of topic, then considering the literature review, the methodology, and finally the findings, discussion and conclusion. Supervisors were asked to identify enablers and inhibitors at each stage of the research process. In general, inhibitors were identified more readily than enablers, and where enablers were identified, supervisors tended to highlight how the supervision process could support the students through *discourse* and *critical reflection*.

Student engagement with topic selection and the Introduction

The early stages of the research project require the students to have some preliminary *awareness of societal issues* through previous modules which they can draw on to inform their choice of topic, and also an *awareness of self* which allows them to see their own positionality in relation to the topic area. An emancipatory paradigm would also suggest students should select topics which show a fundamental *awareness of the other*, and a desire to promote human rights and social justice in keeping with the values of their programmes.

Inhibitors

Supervisors all highlight that students find choosing a topic very stressful, and this impacts on their ability to really reflect and find a topic which is significant to them in the context of their

studies. Students are *'overwhelmed'* (P1), *'paralysed by choice'* (P3), and have a *'fear of making the wrong decision... Deer in the headlights stuff'* (P1).

Different student behaviours are evident here, with students delaying in choosing a topic, and then *'Playing it safe... Choosing an "easy" topic and then panicking at how to write 10,000 words on it'* (P1), or *'they focus on something they think they know the answer to'* (P5). Lack of reflection can lead to choosing a superficial topic: *'Sometimes a student kind of jumps in and that can have an impact on how transformative it is'* (P4).

Supervisors feel strongly that students should choose topics that are closely aligned with the values of the particular programme they are studying rather than more generic topics which are often seen as being too broad, too unrealistic or too media based, and not necessarily topics suitable for a capstone project. One supervisor gives the example of a student saying, *"I want to do it on homelessness". What about homelessness? "Oh, how can we support people to exit homelessness?" I'd say 'that's not community work, where is this coming from?'* (P2), and another comments *'It should be integrated ...the students should be building on what they did in other modules and in my experience they don't necessarily, or they may do for one particular module...'* (P7).

Another point raised is around student connections to topics, one supervisor remarks that *'we're saying research an area that you're interested in, but if they don't have the connections to it...'* (P7). It is felt that unless students have some connection with a group such as Travellers through personal experience or placement for example, they will be ill-equipped to start a research project on such a topic in Year 4. This ties in with students using the lens of *their own autobiographies* to critically reflect.

Over-reliance on the lens of their own autobiographies can also be problematic where students are *'over-ambitious and become overwhelmed'* (P3). This suggests a lack of awareness on the part of the student in terms of their own insights and the potential complexity of a topic. Student motivations may be unrealistic even if they show a desire for some transformative element: *'everyone wants to cure the proverbial cancer'* (P3). In this regard it is also noted that issues may arise if students choose topics which are too personal, especially if it is a sensitive topic which a student is still grappling with: *'It's related to something they have had an*

experience with that they themselves are finding really challenging... no-one is following up on them and they are emotionally not secure' (P5).

Enablers

Supervisors favour topics that tie in with the applied nature of programmes, one supervisor gives an example of a student choosing a topic on sustainable development. This may be transformative for the student but also for the sector: *'This is important for community work, youth work, it's a value of community work... how do we embed it in practice... how do we make it more universal?'* (P2).

Several supervisors highlight the importance of engagement in reading around the topic area and *theoretical literature* is one of the lenses for reflective practice: *'Really reading about the topic can have a big impact on it... that can really support them to generate ideas'* (P4). This is especially effective for students who have engaged in reading a lot over the previous undergraduate years, *'this really supports their ability to read sources critically and critically evaluate... it does have a correlation with how transformative it can be down the line.'* (P4)

This deep reading is seen to be particularly helpful in choosing a topic that could be more transformative, and an example given is of a student who was looking at the topic of stress and burnout in the workplace and why people leave social care positions:

'She did a lot of reading and really engaged critically with the topic and she changed, and came back around to the question why do people stay? ... She was able to use what she was learning and pivot around - not how often people are stressed but actually loads of people don't leave these stressful jobs. Lots of people stay and have attachments to service users and attachments to their team and attachments to the organization... there is transformative learning in a significant project like that' (P5).

Supervisors see the potential for a significant role for themselves in helping the student to find a topic that resonates with some deeper understanding the student may have of critical issues in their field of study. This critical reflection can be collaborative: *'It's about having somebody there... who very much encouraged them to pursue something that they have a really critical interest in'* (P1), or to challenge the student *'If you were given free licence... within the realms of the programme to do whatever you want ...what would really interest you?... What really lights the fire in your belly?'* (P1).

The reflective practice on placement is frequently cited by supervisors as an excellent precursor to choosing a meaningful research area as it highlights *‘issues that are really affecting people in the community ... research that’s really based on those kinds of complex issues that are affecting people currently’* (P4). Another supervisor agrees that students should get *‘ideas about what’s interesting and what they are noticing in the places where they have done placements’* and wonders if fieldwork supervisors might *‘help a student think about what they might do in their final year to make it more meaningful from the content point of view’* (P5).

Student Engagement with the Literature Review

Engagement with key literature provides students with the *lens of theoretical literature* and this contributes in particular to their *awareness of societal issues* which underpin their topic area. This involves growing awareness of *‘the different power dynamics at play within society ... from a power perspective’* (P1). The student’s *awareness of self* can be challenged in terms of their positionality and bias, and in being open to new perspectives they may find in their reading, expanding their understanding of their topic.

Inhibitors

Supervisors express concern around students having the reflective skills necessary for engaging with literature in a meaningful way: *‘I think they struggle with critical thinking, I think they struggle with reflection’* (P7). Supervisors note that students often do not see how the literature informs their project as a whole:

“‘I’ve done my literature, that’s that ticked, now the next step” rather than taking what’s in the literature and really using it to position their study ... It’s that piece then of “how is this literature going to support me to conduct the research, what’s the relevance of what’s there?”’ (P2).

One supervisor notes the issue of students not attending supervision sessions and missing out on guidance on how to use the literature:

‘If they show up.... I would seriously question their ability to engage with the literature in a way that would allow them to pull out aims and objectives by themselves ... even with the experience that they had before of writing essays.... It’s a fairly particular task ... I don’t think they will ever recover if they miss that step in the process’ (P3).

Engaging with key literature also brings the need to be open to new perspectives and to become aware of the limitations of their current mindsets which are key elements in transformative learning. Where this does not happen, *‘You can come to a particular research project or any*

issues with your own particular biases... you enter into your literature review and the broader project with a pre-determined outcome' (P1). In this regard, this supervisor points out that a research project is not what the students expect from previous assignments:

'This is not a big essay... you don't have one over-arching argument...this is a research project where you uncover what people think, now when you review literature, you have to broadly follow a similar type of strategy' (P1).

The task of 'uncovering' suggests a disposition on the part of the student, where they can critically reflect on how their current perspectives may be different to those expressed in the literature and to show '*ambivalence*' (P6) in valuing different perspectives.

Enablers

The literature review is seen to be a significant factor in choosing an appropriate topic: '*They have to speak to where the literature has left off in some niche area*' (P3). This goes beyond mere topic selection to defining the research question and finding one that is relevant to the applied element of their programme and '*clarifying how the student's research could potentially be useful in some practical way in regard to the literature*' (P3).

Supervisors see themselves supporting the students to read critically and question their assumptions which combines the elements of *critical reflection* and *discourse* and opening to a diversity of views: '*get them to understand that they have to critically engage with literature that they themselves may not necessarily agree with*' (P1).

The two-way conversation between supervisor and student can be key to a transformative approach, scaffolding the student's growing understanding of their topic area through extensive reading:

'there'll be a constant over and back between the students and the supervisor ... Socratic questioning works well... bring them to the verge and they cross it by themselves. The supervisor will not necessarily know where the Socratic question is going at the outset. I think it's through that conversation that insights emerge, playing devil's advocate'(P3).

One supervisor comments that the students that show most growth are those who do extensive reading and get on-going feedback from their supervisor:

'looking at their topic and all the policy part and expand and expand and going back to the library and building the blocks... some students are really impressive in that way... you could see them taking the feedback and really boost what they were doing

from the feedback... It helps you go 'oh yeah' because somebody else sees what you don't see ... feedback is really important' (P5).

Student engagement with the Methodology and Data Collection

As most students choose qualitative research using semi-structured interviews, the interpersonal dimension brings about an interplay between the student's *awareness of self* and *awareness of the other* which are brought face to face in the interview process. The four lenses of reflective practice can come together in the methodology as students draw on their own *autobiographies* for interests and positionality, the lens of *theoretical literature* underpinning the study, the lens of *colleagues' experiences* is provided by the service providers they recruit as participants in their study, and the lens of *service-users* either directly in the interviews or indirectly as expressed by the service providers. Year 4 students have access to practitioners through previous placements and in some cases colleagues in current workplaces as many work part-time with their level 7 qualification.

Inhibitors

In terms of question design, supervisors identify the link with the literature: *'The students that do less well in the literature review are all over the place ... and then that impacts on how well they ask questions and stay focused on their topic' (P5).*

Another issue is where the questions do not link in with the aims of the study:

'You start off with this mad set of questions, 10 – 15 questions that don't bear any relationship back to the aims and objectives... the questions have to lead very explicitly back to the objectives and these questions have to help them to meet each of their individual objectives' (P1).

In this regard one supervisor highlights that their questions are not embedded in the values of their programme and do not lead to any real learning for the student: *'sometimes the questions they ask are not leading towards transformative learning, but they're not in keeping with the values either' (P7).*

Supervisors agree on the need for students to be open-minded going into their research and issues concerning impartiality arise, where students are very much acting from their own assumptions, *'Some really have difficulty designing questions that may not influence the participants' answers... the learning experience is to have questions that are non-directive ... open to maybe adjusting their starting point' (P4).*

The need to be aware of their own perspectives and a willingness to uncover other perspectives in order to broaden their own viewpoints becomes apparent:

'They do have ideas in their heads that are pre-conceived as opposed to going in and seeing the participants as informing them and letting them think about things... people are going to raise things they never thought of before' (P7).

Supervisors are concerned that students are not getting participants who can best answer the questions being asked. While students sometimes tend to leave it late to seek out participants, supervisors also acknowledge that professionals in social sciences fields are busy people and often inaccessible to undergraduate researchers: *'it's very difficult to get participants they don't know... who maybe have the experience and knowledge to inform the research.... Sometimes it's about what is most convenient' (P4).*

This means students often rely on people they know from placement or peers and settle for less expert or less experienced respondents providing less rich data. One supervisor notes also from the perspective of ethics, such people might *'find it difficult to say no'* (P4) and feel uneasy about withdrawing from an interview.

Enablers

Good groundwork in choosing a topic, research question and aims and objectives follows through in the methodology, *'The better the literature review, the better the questions, the better the entire project'* (P5). Students learn through becoming aware of the gap there might be between their understandings and assumptions and those of their participants:

'It's a bit of a revelation for them ... there's an expectation that the person they are asking the question of will automatically know what they mean. And they sometimes don't appreciate that it could have multiple potential meanings, that the other person might be coming from another point of view' (P3).

This supervisor suggests that students need coaching in understanding other people's perspectives, and that this can be transformative:

'Coaching...to anticipate the perspective of the people that they're speaking with, and to update their impression of that perspective with each successive participant so that they should probably get better at interviewing ... they become more reflective through that coaching process' (P3).

As seen previously under inhibitors, given the importance of the interviews in terms of providing a lens for critical reflection from both a service-provider/colleague's perspective and

an insight into the perspective of service-users directly or indirectly, selection of participants for the study may impact on the quality and relevance of the data collected, in turn impacting on the transformative potential of the project. The supervisor can support the student in this: *‘If you can get it at an earlier stage, let’s really think about who might provide you with that diversity of views on this particular subject matter’* (P1).

While lack of self-awareness of the student can lead to a lack of understanding about the fact that *‘how they couch the question is going to change the answer’* (P3), this in itself can lead to change, *‘the learning experience is to have questions that are non-directive’* (P4). In order to achieve this, students need to reflect on their own positionality in relation to that of the interviewee: *‘Maybe get them to think about that power differential as well... and there’s reflexivity in research... and questioning our biases’* (P7).

This connects with the interpersonal dimension of the interview and how supervisors see the need for students to have *self-awareness* and *awareness of others*:

‘be aware of the impacts the research can have on other people... be cognizant of asking sensitive questions... the research isn’t supposed to have any more impact on the people being interviewed than what they would have on general days’ (P4).

Student Engagement with Findings, Discussion and Conclusion

As the student moves towards analysis and discussion of their findings, they have the opportunity to show a new *awareness of societal issues*, through a growing *awareness of the other* and their position in society, and in so doing demonstrate an expanded *awareness of self*. Supervisors in general are of the view that currently there is good research being carried out by some but by no means by all students. *‘I do think there are students who present interesting meaningful research that does have the potential to be shared to be built on as well’* (P2). However, the supervisor also notes that these research projects do not necessarily link in with the values of the programme as a capstone project should do.

Inhibitors

Students may have difficulty understanding how to use the various chapters in a meaningful way to present findings and discuss them. *‘They find it very hard to differentiate the findings from the discussion, conceptually it’s hard to get’* (P1). Students may be focused on practical issues rather than having time to really reflect, *‘they’re trying to stick to the rules... they don’t understand the rules very well’* (P6).

Supervisors in some cases see students taking an approach that is superficial rather than analytical: *'They go for the easy option in relation to the data they have and how they use and discuss it'* (P1), and more specifically:

'So many students... they really just paraphrase what their interviewees said rather than performing an analysis per se that interprets context, and cross-references the participants' various statements' (P3).

As seen in previous sections, lack of openness to their findings can mean missed opportunities for transformative learning, in particular as unexpected findings may be the disorienting dilemma needed to trigger *critical reflection* and through *discourse* to gain a more inclusive understanding of an issue: *'If the student maybe isn't open to coming across something they weren't expecting, I think that can really have an impact. And again, I think it can be unconscious'* (P4). Where they may be conscious of it, without guidance they may not know how to deal with it:

'One of the other things they struggle to get is that it's ok if your research establishes things that you didn't expect to encounter, you know, that differ from what you thought you were going to encounter' (P1).

Instead of seeing this as an opportunity for learning, this supervisor provides this insight on student thinking: *"I think I've found something here. But it doesn't really sit with what I believe or thought was going to happen. So therefore I might try and ignore it."* (P1). Difficulties at this stage can relate to a range of different elements, all of which tie in with transformative learning. Earlier weaknesses may be compounded at this stage: *'If there's something missing from the earlier sections, usually the discussion chapter suffers'* (P3).

This should be the opportunity for seeing their research question bringing to light emerging as well as expected themes which allow for transformative learning however *'sometimes there's nothing new in the discussion of findings... I think the process of transformative learning is always happening until the very end'* (P5). Another supervisor comments: *'The ability to critically think or critically analyse is key within the final sections... They can find it quite difficult ...to develop an argument or maybe compare their findings with previous literature'* (P4).

Supervisors see this link to the literature as being fundamental to the rationale for the project as a whole: *'It's their contribution to the literature base... it's quite often not spotted, not seen as that'* (P1). Lack of integration of the findings with the literature leaves connections unmade

and overall learning fragmented: *'Being able to integrate what they found with what was previously found... that kind of deep analysis - if the student finds that challenging - that can be an inhibitor'* (P4). Supervisors express a view that current approaches to the research project do not prioritise the transformative learning dimension and as a result most student research projects lack that focus. One supervisor remarked:

'What I have read hasn't been transformative in the sense that this is my capstone project bringing everything together, this is my contribution... I don't think it has that dimension... going back to the roots or the purpose of community development' (P2).

Another supervisor was of the view that transformative learning and reflection are considered an important part of a research project by most supervisors, however, in order to achieve this, it may need to be included overtly in a visible way from the start of their studies and there may also be the need to track incremental changes in mindsets over the four years of their degree:

'So their conclusion, if you look at the breakdown of chapters, we don't have any space in what we're currently asking them to do, to really find that reflective piece... maybe introducing a piece ... they can go back to what they thought ... they had different views and mindsets around it in first year...' (P7).

An inhibitor identified by all supervisors was stress and time management issues, which had also been highlighted at the start of the research process related to choosing a topic. This is described variously as: *'The student at this stage is fatigued. I think they are trying to race to the end sometimes'* (P5), *'discussion fatigue sets in there... it's typically a week or two before the deadline... it's just overall dissertation and college fatigue'* (P1), *'They're so out of time at this stage in terms of the findings and discussion. They don't do really good explanations around it'* (P7), and as one supervisor notes *'They run out of steam they want it done ... I don't think that's transformative'* (P2).

Enablers

Supervisors highlight how these final chapters of the dissertation are where transformative learning at the level of the individual student can be evident: *'The student's self-awareness and ability to be impartial is key especially with the findings and discussion. So I suppose question their own assumptions, their own values'* (P4). At the level of data analysis, lack of critical thinking can be an obstacle to really reflecting on the interviews with respondents. This supervisor stresses the importance of highlighting to students that in qualitative data analysis:

'Their job isn't just to paraphrase what was said but to interpret the functional meaning of it, given the situation and the way it was said, and you know, the posture and the intonation and all of these different elements of context and the person who's saying

“I”, and where they might be coming from, that point of view, I suppose I have found it to be a transformative experience with the students who are engaged’ (P3).

Sustained engagement with the project and with the supervision process are seen to be fundamental to transformative learning:

‘With students who do engage, they end up consolidating those earlier transformative experiences ... playing devil’s advocate with the literature, find the gap and set about exploring it with an open-mind and suspending your pre-conceptions... it does tend to come to fruition during the discussion chapter ... every year I have a few students and I’m just really blown away and enthused’ (P3).

Such skills go beyond the research project itself: *‘They do develop transferrable skills linked to transformative learning such as critical thinking ... developing an argument, deciding on research, design, analysing data, drawing conclusions, I think they all can be transformative in nature’ (P4).* This supervisor also made the point that this transformative piece can go beyond the written dissertation and become embedded in practice, so that the students can become agents of change in their future workplaces: *‘They are more likely after spending so much time on a topic, more likely to take action on it... it informs best practice’ (P4).* This is a particularly important insight as it links the personally transformative piece to the potential for transformation in society.

Discussion

This discussion of findings works across themes identified in the data to adopt a more holistic approach to answering the research question which focused on exploring the potential for Transformative Learning through Critical Reflection for undergraduate students of Applied Social Sciences undertaking Final Year Research projects. Five main areas are discussed: Transformative Learning and Awareness; Critical thinking; the Supervision Process; Organisational Issues and Recommendations; and Implications for practice.

Transformative Learning and Awareness

It is evident from this research that although none of the supervisors claims to have any specialist knowledge of transformative learning, their insights into how it applies to their programmes are particularly rich due possibly in part to their backgrounds in Sociology, Psychology and related fields and also to their expressed interest in taking part in the study. While supervisors have an appreciation of the potential for transformative learning for students undertaking research projects, there is a strong sense that *‘this is not a given’ (P7).* Overall,

supervisors identify inhibitors very readily and it is reasonable that this should be the case where currently a transformative learning approach has not been adopted in any overt way. Supervisors suggest ways of integrating transformative learning by having research projects tie in more closely with the values of the programmes, the modules already studied, placement and in this way becoming a capstone project.

Similarly with the view that *'some but not all'* (P3) students experience transformative learning, rather than seeing this as a deficit in the student, it is likely that more engagement in the research project supervision process, and more time to focus on critical thinking around issues would provide more opportunities for more students to experience transformative learning. Supervisors are of the view that transformative learning is *'a gradual process'* (P3) and *'this happens incrementally and that they are scaffolded'* (P7).

The emergence of the themes of *awareness of self*, *awareness of the other* and *awareness of societal issues* provided an additional lens through which to view the perceived enablers and inhibitors at each stage of the research process. Issues identified by supervisors related to *awareness of self* are a lack of awareness of their own *positionality* (P2, P7) and *pre-conceptions* (P3, P4) which come through strongly at each stage of the research project, in particular in relation to their *awareness of the other* which translates into issues of *'bias'* (P6), and the need to understand *'other people's viewpoints'* (P4, P6). The *'frames of reference'* (Mezirow, 2000, p.7) of these students need to be transformed where their assumptions based on past experience and *'the belief system of their area, or their family'* (P5) need to become more *'inclusive'* and *'reflective'*.

Greater *awareness of the other* leads directly to *awareness of societal issues* where supervisors see students needing to have an appreciation of a Freirean view that *'the personal is political'* (P1, P2, P7) and can link not just their own, but others' experiences to broader issues of social justice, connecting to the vision of Mezirow (1998, p.72) for individuals who would be *'cemented by empathic solidarity committed to the social practice of participatory democracy, informed through critical reflection and would take reflective action where necessary'*. These principles are strongly supported by supervisors who identify *'participatory democracy, and how transformative learning can add to that, engaged citizens, social cohesion, social dialogue'* (P2) and *'it's the self, but it's the social structures around, and how the self as a practitioner is interacting ... to bring about transformation'* (P7).

These three levels of awareness are seen by supervisors to impact on students' ability to choose topics which are meaningful for them but also tie in with the values of the programmes which aim to produce graduates who are reflective researchers with an internalized world view founded on principles of human rights and social justice. Students' openness to new perspectives impacts on how they view the literature and how it informs their topic, providing a basis for aims and objectives and also the questions they will ask in interviews. Awareness is seen as key to conducting interviews where students' own bias has been reflected on and where new perspectives are welcomed, and to the critical reflection needed to consider how the findings connect with the literature and to uncovering and discussing different perspectives and considering what action might be needed in the future in terms of promoting greater social justice in their field of study.

Critical Reflection

A pre-requisite for Transformative Learning and development in the three levels of awareness identified by supervisors is critical reflection and students' ability to engage in critical reflection emerges as a key concern for supervisors and the lenses for critical reflection proposed by Brookfield (2016) are all in evidence here.

In terms of *self-awareness*, there is recognition by supervisors that a research project provides the opportunities for students to reflect on their own experience of life and learning particularly to inform a choice of research topic which ties in with Brookfield (2016) who considered the lens of students' *own autobiographies* as providing students with a way of reflecting on their lived experience and the contention by Loxley et al. (2017, p.252) that 'pedagogy and curricula speak to the diverse social and life experiences' of students.

Theoretical literature remains an important source for reflection, and the interaction between student and key sources is considered essential by supervisors for developing an informed view of their research area relevant to their field of study, for exploring a range of perspectives, and analysing how these perspectives are reflected in the data they have collected. On an interpersonal level of *awareness of the other* undertaking qualitative research provides students with the opportunity to learn from the *experiences of service-providers* and gain insights into the *experiences of service-users*. However, in order to do so, students need to question their own frames of reference and assumptions (Mezirow, 2000), learn how to ask unbiased questions,

and be open to encountering perspectives they did not expect or that do not fit in with their views.

Where a research project may be transformative for a student, it may also be transformative for future practice and have a social justice dimension at the level of *awareness of societal issues*, assuring that ‘social systems and local institutions, organisations, and their practices are responsive to the human needs of those they service’ (Mezirow, 1998, p.72). It is in this context that the critical thinking involved in a research project ties in with Brookfield’s (2016) assertion that critical thinking must be linked to Critical Theory and the uncovering and challenging of power dynamics to create a more just society.

Supervision Process

The supervisors in this study highlight their role in supporting the students at each stage of their research project, in particular in developing critical thinking, challenging students on their assumptions, and encouraging students to look at new ways of thinking. It is evident from this study that the research supervision process provides a unique opportunity for students and supervisors to engage in dialogue around their research which provides the *discourse* put forward by Mezirow where *critical thinking* and disorienting dilemmas relating to the research can be resolved. Supervisors demonstrate skills in initiating discussion and encouraging reflection in students in keeping with Mezirow’s (2003) contention that educators need to foster these skills in students. This is also a more student-centred and democratic process where supervisors are also open to learning from what the student brings to the meeting and potentially ‘*being blown away and enthused*’ (P3) by some projects, suggesting that supervisors may be transformed themselves through engaging with students’ research projects. This ties in with the contention of Loxley et al. (2017) that the educator and student should be ‘co-investigating reality and acknowledging the mutuality of the teaching / learning process’. Supervisors show a willingness to engage with students at this level, and in this study there are many examples of supervisors’ disappointment where this is not happening.

Organizational Issues and Recommendations

A considerable number of organizational issues related to the final year research project arise in this study which are not particular to, but do impact on, the transformative dimension to the research project.

Stress for students is evident at each stage of the process. Initially there is a lack of familiarity with the demands of this piece of academic work, there are issues of time management. When discussing students' *awareness of self*, supervisors raise issues of students' need for '*personal development*' in terms of developing resilience and '*self-esteem*' (P5, P6), which might be seen to impact on their self-efficacy in approaching the research project with confidence and competence. These may reflect some of the 'vulnerabilities' of non-traditional students (Loxley, 2017, p.252), and supervisors may need to take account of these.

For a transformative learning approach is to be adopted, time, which was identified as a requisite by supervisors, needs to be considered carefully. Key stress points identified for students are at the beginning of the year at the point of topic selection, mid-year finding participants, and at the end of the year when writing up discussion and conclusion chapters. These are all identified as significant inhibitors to transformative learning. Earlier consideration of a topic on completion of the Year 3 placement might provide more opportunity for reflection and as suggested by P2, '*embed it in practice*'. Conversations on recruiting participants should also start sooner, as suggested by P1, '*if you can get it at an earlier stage, really think about who might give you that diversity of views*'. As '*the process of transformative learning is happening right to the end*' (P5), adequate time needs to be given to the discussion of the final chapters in supervision, allowing for the types of conversations at supervision sessions which can lead to transformative learning through the dual elements of *critical reflection* and *discourse*.

Attendance at supervision sessions is identified as an issue and the data collected from this study suggests supervisors are more than willing to adopt a democratic approach with students, working with them and scaffolding them. A clearer articulation of this role might be beneficial for students and supervisors to encourage greater attendance.

Implications for Practice

There is evidence that a focus on a transformative learning approach could enhance the research process for all students. Strong students with very good academic writing skills can be challenged to ensure that their dissertation reflects the values of their programme and the field in which they are going to work and become in the process more critically reflective regarding issues of social justice. Weaker students who struggle with academic writing may find a transformative learning approach more motivating and the critical reflection on issues of social

justice something that they can relate to, all of which will benefit the production of their dissertation. In terms of assessment, as suggested by one supervisor, some way of capturing the student's transformative learning in some mode needs to be considered, as a reflective piece within the dissertation or perhaps as a separate poster presentation.

The lecturers participating in this study are all experts in their fields and experienced supervisors, and other new or less experienced lecturers who have not themselves developed high levels of critical reflection may be less aware of the transformative element in research supervision. This transformative dimension to research supervision may be neglected where supervisors see their role as giving feedback on written drafts of sections and improving academic writing, where the considerable power differential created by this approach may impede dialogue. Supervisors would benefit from specific training in this area, and it could be included more overtly in Research Methods modules.

Key concepts of democratic principles underpin Transformative Learning, Critical Theory (Mezirow, 2000) Critical Reflection (Brookfield, 2006) and pedagogy for non-traditional students (Loxley et al., 2017) and these are affirmed strongly by the supervisors in Applied Social Sciences interviewed in this study. This suggests a coherence in terms of research methods associated with transformative learning, the applied nature of the programmes in which they are situated, and the predisposition of supervisors engaging with students in a meaningful way. Not only is there potential for Transformative Learning through Critical Reflection for students undertaking undergraduate research, it is already implicit to some extent but could be embedded more explicitly to the benefit of students and supervisors and the claim that: 'Education would be an exercise in democracy that teaches democracy and aims to reproduce democratic classrooms, communities, workplaces and society' (Loxley et al., p.256).

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