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The impact of transformational learning for mature adults studying a Foundation Degree

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Abstract This paper discusses the findings from a longitudinal, qualitative research study that explored the challenges that adult, work-based learners experience when studying a Foundation Degree, with a particular focus on those learners identified in the sample as mature adults (45–65 years). Fundamentally, the research focus was on learning, and particularly on transformational learning. The study has enabled observations of learning beyond the cognitive to capture emotional and social dimensions through ‘feedforward’ tutorials where points of challenge and shifts in learning were visible. Powerful emotional responses surrounded the challenges experienced by the learners. Concepts of self-efficacy and agency were central to this investigation where motivation and purpose for learning presented as critical factors for undertaking the Foundation Degree.

Key words Foundation Degree; adult learners; transformation; transformational learning; motivation

Introduction

Work-based Foundation Degrees (FdA) were introduced in England and Wales by the Department for Education and Skills in 2000, under a Labour government. As the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) states, FdAs were established ‘to provide graduates needed within the labour market to address shortages in particular skills’ (QAA, 2015, p. 2). FdAs integrate academic and work-based learning and are intended to ‘equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to employment, so satisfying the needs of employees and employers’ (QAA, 2015, p. 2). Indeed, C. Taylor (2008, p. 48) discusses FdAs as a ‘new vocationalism’ in which academic and work-based learning are integrated. Boud, Solomon and Symes (2001, p. 4) describe work-based learning as a ‘class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces’.

An FdA course equates to the first two years of a regular undergraduate programme (QAA, 2008) and the exit award is at level 5 in the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications. FdAs contribute to widening participation and lifelong learning within the Higher Education (HE) sector ‘by encouraging participation by learners who may not previously have considered studying for a higher level qualification or prefer a more applied curriculum’ (QAA, 2015, p. 2). The participants in this study were all working within the early years sector and remained in employment alongside the two year duration of the programme to ‘earn and learn’, which is a

distinct characteristic of an FdA (QAA, 2015, p. 5). The prolonged and sustained experience in the workplace is an 'integral part of the programme' (QAA, 2015, p. 5). Indeed, the QAA (2015, p. 5) state the requirement for universities to recognise 'the knowledge, skills and understanding that an applicant for a foundation degree has already developed'.

FdAs often appeal to adults who have not previously considered studying in HE, including learners with characteristics that are considered 'non-traditional' (Lillis, 2001: 4) and those from 'social groups who have historically been largely excluded from HE' (Ibid: 1). For FdA learners, these characteristics may typically include age, gender and previous educational attainment, often attracting mature learners, particularly women, and those without formal qualifications such as A Levels (QAA, 2015). The site of this research was an independent small HE institution situated in the east of England, with a long reputation for the academic and vocational study of education. The term 'the academy', used throughout this article, refers to the social and academic world of HE and represents the broad collective of places of study in the United Kingdom (UK); universities and colleges.

The non-traditional learner, such as those on an FdA, are positioned as such in the academy because of the particular characteristics that they hold: their age, gender, employment commitments, professional knowledge, family and financial responsibilities. These wider commitments and life experiences suggest a complex network of histories, demands and influences on FdA learners. Typically, FdA learners enter the academy with more limited formal qualifications and those achieved post-formal-schooling are largely vocationally orientated. Many return to formal learning with the distinct purpose to become better professionals in the workplace. Cooke and Lawton (2008) state that many early years practitioners undertake formal qualifications in order to 'better themselves', with this desire underpinned by a commitment to the young children with whom they work. Research conducted by Knight, Tennant, Dillon and Weddell (2006) with learners undertaking an early years FdA indicated that the learners felt greater job satisfaction and confidence, and that their work-based skills had improved by undertaking their programme.

Knight et al. (2006, p. 12) reported a factor that enabled completion of FdAs as being high self-motivation. High self-motivation is a critical component for learning and in adulthood is characterised by 'a kind of ambition that implies a striving to realise more or less clear life aims relating to family, career, interest or something else' (Illeris, 2002, p. 217). In this way, FdA learners can be understood as adults wanting to learn something that is meaningful to them and a professional development course such as the FdA can provide this opportunity. As a motivated adult learner who takes responsibility for their own learning, the learner has the capacity and potential for 'goal-directed, effective, transcendent' learning to occur (Illeris, 2002, p. 221). The distinct capacity for transformational learning that the adults, and in particular, the mature adults showed during their HE course was

evident in this study across the different dimensions (personal, professional and academic) of their lives. Transformation in this context refers to a change or 'alteration into something qualitatively different' and the concept of transformational learning is defined as learning that 'entails a qualitatively new structure or capacity in the [adult] learner' (Illeris, 2014, p. 5).

The sample in this qualitative, small-scale study consisted of adult learners studying for an FdA across an age range of 20 to 52 years (n=12). The study's focus was on learning and, specifically, transformational learning (Mezirow, 2009; Taylor and Jerecke, 2009; Illeris, 2014). Adulthood is defined by Illeris (2014: 90) as middle to late twenties. Mature adulthood is identified as between 45 and 65 years and 'characterised by a personal libidinal motivation without the aura of necessity or external incentive that often forms the basis of learning in earlier adulthood' (Illeris, 2014, p. 90). The term 'libidinal' depicts a lustful motivation to learn at this stage in life and captures a powerful, intrinsic driving force to undertake learning. This has particular resonance with three of the learners in the study (Amber, Philippa and Mary) who fell within the mature adulthood age, as defined by Illeris (2014), and are of particular focus in this article. O'Shea recognises the limited understanding held about how older, 'second chance' learners manage success within the educational environment (2016, p. 35) and this study seeks to contribute, in some way, to better understanding of mature adult learners.

Literature Review

To explore the central tenet of this article, the concept of transformational learning, it is important to understand the notion of knowledge itself. Knowing what knowledge is, is a highly complex intellectual act. Knowledge is created from individual experience and Taylor argues that there is an 'instinctive drive among all humans to make meaning of their daily lives' (E. Taylor, 2008, p. 5). Knowledge is the product of learning. Knowledge can therefore be explained as a series of tentative thoughts that are constructed together to create granulated ideas, or private theories which are dynamic, organic and evolving (Eraut, 1994). If, as Eraut (1994) outlines, knowledge is individualised and is generated through private theories, this suggests a highly personal process that is specific to each learner.

Gibbons et al. (1994, p. 19) explore the different forms of knowledge ; mode one and mode two. Mode one describes a more traditional concept and is considered as theoretical knowledge or fundamental knowledge. Applied knowledge (mode two) is where theoretical frameworks are translated into practical applications. Atkinson and Claxton (2000, p. 2) refer to this form of learning as the 'scholastic model' where students start with academic knowledge and then put it into practice, which infers linearity. This mode can, at a simplistic level, be seen to be relevant to the FdA work-based learners in this study as theoretical knowledge acquired within the academy is then applied to their practice. However, the notion of linearity is problematic with work-based learners as they enter the academy with professional knowledge, which then requires their academic knowledge to be associated with

their practice. As such, the 'scholastic model' suggested by Atkinson and Claxton (2000) is indeed too simplistic. For work-based learners who are competent professionals and who have acquired practice knowledge, the process of applying knowledge learnt in the academy as part of the FdA is more complex.

The dynamic interplay between the theoretical and the practical is constant and mutually dependent when studying for a work-based degree. The term 'symbiotic' could be used to describe the relationship between academic and practice knowledge to reflect the connectedness between domains of knowledge that are equally reinforcing. The notion of symbiosis embraces the concept of dynamic interplay and extends beyond this to represent a mutually advantageous relationship. The process of studying on an FdA means that these interconnections reinforce learning simultaneously across both the academy and the workplace. As such, this contests the notion of a hierarchy of knowledge. Knowledge is instead viewed as a web of interlinking ideas, where learning is acquired through the connections between different sites in a way that resists linearity.

The acknowledgement of the practice setting as also being a place for learning establishes a distinct shift away from the academy as the primary owner of knowledge. Prior learning over many years in the workplace goes unacknowledged by the academy according to Stierer (2000) and O'Shea (2016, p. 48), who argue that the academy needs to 'understand learners in a more holistic sense, which includes recognising (and celebrating) personal and employment biographies'. The work-based, professional learner is required to make increasingly complex links in knowledge between the sites of learning (academic and professional) and to make connections between their knowledge, skills and understanding in order to make sense of each as they assimilate new knowledge with prior knowledge.

The act of reflection, or close examination, of practice is often triggered by learning within the academy, where theoretical models and concepts can be linked to, or explained as, practical understandings. This process goes beyond reflection, I argue, where learners engage critically and analytically with reflections on their practice. The act of doing this allows for 'explanatorily coherent practical knowledge' and represents 'internal consistency' alongside consistency with evidence (Bereiter, 2014, p. 5). Bereiter (2014, p. 4) articulates the connected knowledge between theory and practice as principled practical knowledge (PPK). The link between know-how (practice knowledge) with know-why (theoretical knowledge) leads to PPK. As Bereiter (2014, p. 14) states, 'Principled knowledge should not merely connect theory with practice but should enable the continual and occasionally radical improvement of practice'. PPK provides a catalyst for change and empowers agency through increased self-efficacy. Learning on an FdA affords the work-based learner opportunities for critical reflection and therefore, to make links between practice and theory to support the development of PPK, and for deep and transformational learning to occur.

Learning is an integral and fundamental aspect of any programme of study in HE, although it is complicated, complex and never guaranteed (Illeris, 2002, p. 13).

Learners are able to demonstrate the higher order cognitive competencies taught by academy, such as the construction of a coherent argument, using appropriate evidence, synthesis and analysis (Stierer, 2000) through written tasks. As such, the written assessments undertaken by the learners and, specifically, the grades achieved as part of the programme formed a data set for this study. Illeris (2002, p. 17) is clear that learning covers 'motor, cognitive, emotional, motivational, attitudinal or social character' and is intrinsically bound with identity. This definition foregrounds the work in this research and provides the foundations to discuss transformational learning as a uniquely adult capability (Mezirow, 2003).

The new capacities of the adult learners in this study were observed and transformational learning was identified where a distinct change was evident. The conditions for change were also investigated and were critical for understanding when and how transformational learning took place. For many of the learners, transformational learning was located in the dynamic change from unprincipled to PPK (Bereiter, 2014). These transformations were often evident in the participants' academic writing for assessments as part of the programme, in particular in their assessment grades.

The cognitive demand of linking practice with theory to transform meaning schemes is challenging for many learners. Through critically reflecting in the symbiotic way described earlier, the learner may, initially, be unable to resolve the disequilibrium or feelings of unease they may experience when what they knew as a certainty (a prior meaning scheme) becomes uncertain. The period of discomfort, or challenge, may last for some time and transformational learning is enacted where the learner is able to accommodate the new knowledge or theory with their existing knowledge to re-establish a new and different state of equilibrium:

Transformative learning, especially when it involves subjective reframing, is often an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions undergirding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change (Mezirow, 2000, p. 6-7).

The conditions, that surround the point of subjective reframing or disequilibrium, have been a point of focus for this study as they provide a possible template for how the academy may foster transformational learning. Mezirow (2009) makes clear that transformational learning has been primarily researched in the field of adult education and as such is highly relevant to the participants in this study. Adulthood is the 'golden age in relation to both identity and transformative learning' in that, having established a reasonably stable identity from the mid-to late twenties, there is an opportunity, perversely, to disturb it in relation to all parts of an individual's identity (Illeris, 2014, p. 89). Waller, Bovill and Pitt (2011) highlight

the 'hidden costs' for adult learners in undertaking a programme of study such as the FdA, for example, on personal relationships in the pursuit of, as discussed earlier, 'self-betterment' (2011, p. 511).

The need for purpose, or 'self-betterment', as a condition for change forms one of the six practices defined by Taylor and Jarecke (2009), which build on the theories of Mezirow (2009) regarding transformational learning. The six practices indicate the conditions for learning, rather than forming definitive statements (Taylor and Jarecke, 2009, p. 283). They are for learning to be:

1. a purposeful and heuristic process
2. a way of confronting power and engaging difference
3. an imaginative process
4. a way of fostering reflection
5. learning as modelling, and
6. a process of leading learners to the edge.

This final condition is, I propose, the most critical of the six practices as a catalyst for transformational learning. The notion of leading learners 'to the edge' precipitates the notion of disequilibrium. Leading learners outside their comfortable environment creates feelings that disturb the learner and create discomfort. The need to re-establish an equilibrium, triggered by the feelings of discomfort, creates a challenge for the learner. The process of resolving the challenge may involve their professional, academic and/or personal lives, and this was evident for three mature, adult learners in the sample used here: Amber, Philippa and Mary.

Methodology

This study collected data from twelve adult, work-based learners using the method of feedforward tutorials over a two year period (September 2013 to July 2015). The FdA is a two year programme (levels 4 and 5) and its beginning and ending provided a natural start and end point for the data collection. The data were captured at four points during the two years, once in each semester. The learners experienced two cycles of submitting assignments and feedback prior to each tutorial as part of the usual assessment cycle of the programme. Overall, forty-eight feedforward tutorials were undertaken which were audiotaped, transcribed and then analysed. This article focuses specifically on the qualitative data from the three mature adults identified in the sample – Amber, Philippa and Mary – who were aged between 45–65 years.

From the start of the study, the cohort was informed of the project and volunteers were requested. Informed, written consent was established and all data were confidentially gathered and stored. The right to withdraw from the project at any point was stated. All the participants were white British, which is reflective of the university and of the surrounding locality, which is not typically ethnically diverse (Office for National Statistics, 2011). The anonymity of the participant learners was maintained throughout and the learners chose their own pseudonym.

A critical and challenging aspect of the research design was the location of myself within the process as a practitioner researcher. Within these roles, and specifically as an academic tutor to the participants, a key concern for the research was the position of power I held over the participants as their teacher and gatekeeper (Cousin, 2009, p. 21) makes judgements on the learner's competence within the conventions of an assessment, but also on them as a scholar. This had the potential to effect the learners' disclosure about their experiences on the programme. I was not able to hide from the power dynamic between the learners and the academy or me, and I therefore placed it centre stage for increased transparency and to militate against the impact on the learners' disclosure. The participants' data was checked at every stage to ensure they agreed the transcripts were accurate, authentic representations of the tutorial discussions. The overall analysis and findings were shared and discussed with the learners as an ethical consideration.

'Feedforward' tutorials are a research tool aimed at facilitating the creation of a narrative of the learner's experience of academic writing for assessments. The tutorials were modelled on an investigative tool used by Lillis (2001) in researching the writing experiences of non-traditional learners in HE. The term 'feedforward' is carefully chosen for this research study to reflect the developmental intension of these tutorials within a supportive relationship between learner and tutor. Feedforward tutorials are intended to provide a 'talking space' (Lillis, 2001, p. 9) where participants can share their assignment texts and talk about the processes of undertaking them. Lillis (2001, p. 9) refers to her role as tutor/teacher in using this data collection tool as the 'powerful participant' within the tutorial context, and I adopted the same stance as part of my practitioner researcher role.

The dialogue flowed easily with this approach. Lillis (2001, p. 132) outlines the 'mediating potential' in these talking spaces between learners and tutors, and the individual learner's control over meaning-making, which has the potential to benefit the research process and, I argue, the learner which is reflected in the term for the tutorials as 'feedforward'. The mediation potential supports consultation as a space for discussing the challenges faced by learners and the resulting emotions. A key purpose of using this one-to-one talking space was to capture the richness of a dialogue that was able to unravel their experiences over the time in each tutorial and across time over the two years beyond one-off conversations. The relationships I formed with the learners both in and outside the tutorials as part of the normal business of being their teacher were, I believe, mutually respectful and beneficial, although not without challenges as the open space for talking afforded the opportunity for some frank and transparent discussion.

For each of the participants, analysis was undertaken of the four transcripts from the feedforward tutorial discussions across the two years of data collection. The first tutorial used pre-set, semi-structured questions across the sample. These focused on investigating the learners' biographical details and their views on writing, and on exploring the strategies and processes they had used to undertake the first two module written assignments. The pre-set questions were generated from the findings of a pilot study and were informed by the literature. The tutorial

data from the first discussions were transcribed and analysed to draw out key individual themes. These themes informed the lines of enquiry for the subsequent discussions with each participant and this methodology was replicated for each tutorial. The assessment grades from the learners' written assignments were gathered and provided a tool for analysing where the participants had achieved different grades at varied points on the programme. There was an assumption that higher graded written assignments showed greater levels of analysis, evaluation and synthesis and that this was incremental through the relevant grade boundaries. As increased levels of analysis, evaluation and synthesis are associated with cognitive development, a learner's grade profile would therefore show whether learning, to some degree, had occurred.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from the feedforward tutorials showed where evidence of transformational learning was clear and where PPK (Bereiter, 2014) emerged. For a work-based degree, learners are required to make links within assignments between theoretical frameworks learnt as part of their studies and practice evidence to establish PPK (Bereiter, 2014). This is a characteristic of FdAs as identified by the QAA (2015, p. 4), where 'the learning in one environment is applied in the other' in a symbiotic way. The term 'symbiotic' is specifically used here to reflect the interconnected, mutually advantageous relationship between the practice setting and academy as sites of learning. In this way, professional and academic dimensions form the central domains for discussion, along with the surrounding emotional responses associated with the learners' academic work.

The participants shared their perceived competencies within the workplace and where they believed their practice knowledge and understandings changed from undertaking their FdA studies:

[There] was a light bulb moment, so that's one thing I've learnt here – so if I did nothing else... there's been quite a lot of stuff, you know, a lot of Vygotsky, and a lot of bits and pieces like that, and you think: 'yeah we do that anyway', Skinner oh god yeah, we've conditioned them, you know, and all these things, but there has been a lot of that thinking: 'oh, yeah that's alright, that's what we've always done, well where have you got that from? Cos that's what I've always done, that's what I think we should do', so I've now got theorists that back up why I've done it, but where did I get it from? So they can underpin me you see, if that makes sense. So yeah, no, I've learnt an awful lot, there's been quite a few light bulb moments (Amber, 2015b, Tutorial 4).

Here Amber, an experienced practitioner of nineteen years in the sector, made clear the impact of her learning on the programme. However, Amber had high

academic expectations of herself and she declared that she found her academic work challenging. A physical response, followed by an emotional episode that she experienced, suggested the depth of anxiety that Amber felt about her studies:

... through the week I didn't understand the question to the essay, it was explained in class and I still didn't understand it. And all of a sudden I came home and there was this bright red rash and I found I'd got a headache, I didn't feel well... so I said to [tutor's name] 'will you come and explain', so she did, she came and explained it fully, which made it an awful lot clearer. But all of a sudden I just burst into tears, I know, it's because I couldn't see – I couldn't see the end, and if I can't see the end, I can't do it. (Amber, 2014a, Tutorial 1).

Here, Amber's feelings are indicative of the uncertainty she felt, which is at odds with her competency in practice. The disequilibrium that Amber physically and emotionally experienced was centred on 'a fear of failure' (Transcript 1, Amber). Her fear of failing was overwhelming and when I asked her if she had ever failed, she commented that she had not. She acknowledged that she was unsure of where this feeling had arisen and that she felt 'stupid really, cos I know I can do it' (Amber, 2014b, Tutorial 2). Amber is in mature adulthood, which aligns with having a more stable identity, particularly in her professional life, and Illeris (2014, p. 105) suggests that 'people do not change elements of their identity if they do not have good reasons to do so'. For Amber, the strong emotions associated with her studies indicated a 'personal libidinal motivation' (Illeris, 2014, p. 90) to undertake the programme. A recurring theme across all the tutorials was Amber's dissatisfaction with the grades she achieved. She frequently commented that although she knew they were good, she 'wanted more – I wanted more' (Amber, 2014b, Tutorial 2). Through the high expectations of herself underpinned by a motivation to do 'well', Amber became anxious and this was evident in her emotional and physical responses. In the final tutorial, Amber was upset with her final grade for the module (55%) that she had just completed, which reflected an average overall between two assessment components. She was clear about her feelings:

I did the crappiest piece of work I've ever done, got thirties in one of them, crap, absolutely rubbish (, Amber, 2015b, Tutorial 4).

Amber used the word 'rubbish' five times during the tutorial, repeating that it was the worst she had ever done. Her aspiration for high grades became Amber's challenge. More specifically, the validation of her work by an external marker was an important factor within the learning process for her. As Illeris (2014, p. 9) states, the dialogue between the tutor and the learner must go 'far beyond the analytical discourse and involve the attention on the attitudes, emotions, personalities and values of the participants'. For work-based, mature learners, returning to learning

at HE level is a high stakes endeavour (Illeris, 2014), especially for those who are experienced and well respected in their chosen field of practice. It represents a potential professional risk (O'Shea, 2016) for them where there is a disconnection between an evident competency in one domain (professional) that is not perceived as replicated in another (academic). For an experienced practitioner and manager such as Amber, her perceptions of her 'success' on the programme, determined by the grades she achieved, was overwhelming and obscured the overall experience.

Within the workplace domain, participants were able to identify different challenges, for example, dissatisfaction in the workplace. The dissatisfaction evidenced a change and, therefore, transformational learning as previously defined. This change was evident for Mary, who sought new employment throughout the first year of her studies due to her increased disconnection with the practices in the setting and with colleagues. Mary's increased critical reflection about her own practice triggered a need for a setting where her learning on the programme might be more readily utilised. However, this was not realised as after securing a new role, Mary talked about the staff there as being 'very flat and tired' (Mary, 2014b, Tutorial 2). She discussed how she intended to motivate the staff team and enable them to rethink their practice based on her new understandings from her studies on the FdA so far:

... it's almost like they're ticking along... they come in, do it and go, and there's no, they're quite reticent to new things that have been put in place and... I think something, you know, that's one of my things that I want... To sort of gee them up to, 'yes you're doing a good job'... and maybe making them think 'why are you doing it', not just 'well that's cos that's what we do'. Give them a bit of confidence (Mary, 2014b, Tutorial 2).

Mary subsequently left this setting within the space of a few weeks to go to another and then left that establishment a few months later to join a fellow learner on the programme in a different setting, who was working as the manager of a pre-school. Her management of change in this instance by using a fellow learner was relevant, as the circumstances supported increased confidence and self-efficacy (Illeris, 2014, p. 10) which, I argue, were reinforced by their shared experience of undertaking the programme. It is possible the role gave Mary opportunities for critical reflection in practice, along with the possibility of change within practice underpinned by theoretical frameworks that Mary described. Mary's equilibrium was restored and she continued in this setting for the remainder of the programme.

For these learners the demands of making sense of their practice through creating connections with the theoretical concepts as part of their academic studies was frequently challenging. In the first tutorial, Philippa commented on the distress she felt at not being able to translate her ideas into written text and she talked about

this being a recurring issue. She had been returning to taught session notes and tutors' PowerPoint presentations to try to trigger some starting points:

I've found again, because I've just had this block I've been looking at, on my iPad, um, actually from the first one, um... the constructivist theories, just to sort of go through the PowerPoints, just to see if anything, just to try and get something working, because I've just, yeah it's um... yeah I think at the weekend I did nearly cry, I just thought... just purely because I thought 'I know it's there but I just can't'... (Philippa, 2014, Tutorial 1).

Philippa described a powerful emotional response, although she also stated some sense of pleasure in these sorts of challenges as she acknowledged the power of them in forcing her to make sense of them:

And, again, it sounds really silly, but I'm liking having the experience, it probably sounds really silly because it's how you work through it sort of thing (Philippa, 2014, Tutorial 1).

The capacity to remain motivated and work through to resolve a challenge is a key aspect of transformational learning (Taylor and Jarecke, 2009, p. 283), as learners are led to the edge where they are most susceptible to new learning. The FdA programme demands that assignments be completed within particular timeframes may be perceived as setting the 'edge'. Philippa showed two key elements in transformational learning: fortitude and agency. She demonstrated fortitude and motivation by continuing to seek out strategies to support her writing, and agency where she felt emotionally rewarded by managing the challenge that she faced. These were mutually reinforcing.

Mary stated her overall confidence with undertaking academic writing, she knew that she had 'got to have backing for everything I say, because it's no point, there's no point me drawing on my experience and my training and not backing it up' (Mary, 2014a, Tutorial 1). Mary recognised the need for her to make the links between practice and theory 'to back up' what she wrote. This returns us to Bereiter's (2014) concept of PPK, as discussed earlier, who is clear in stating that linked knowledge may not contribute to a more 'testable theory'; however, it does meet 'standards of explanatory coherence – internal consistency as well as consistency with evidence and coherence with other explanatory propositions within the field' (Bereiter, 2014, p. 5).

PPK is created through problem solving and is formed through an active process in which the practitioner makes sense of a problem through seeking explanation, although this is not its primary purpose. The key purpose of PPK is to provide sufficient explanation that advances practice (Bereiter, 2014). The notion of advancing practice allows for a professional formation of the practitioner which is

not stimulated solely by the application of theory into practice but is, rather, a more multi-directional process with different triggers and starting points. The acknowledgement of Mary's considerable professional knowledge and the need to 'back up' her know-how with know-why suggests a different starting point for PPK in this instance:

And it's – it's not just taught me things, it's made me open up to what I do know, and realise 'oh yeah... that's why... that comes from', you know, instead of just thinking 'well it's what to do. You're consciously... you know things are sort of more conscious now' (Mary, 2014a, Tutorial 1).

The phrase 'made me open up to what I do know' pointed to prior, tacit knowledge transformed into explicit understandings that were linked to theoretical frameworks. However, when asked whether she had questioned her practice while undertaking her studies, she stated, 'Um... not so much. But then, I don't know, because maybe being in childcare so long...' (Mary, 2014a, Tutorial 1). For Mary, her learning about theoretical perspectives was viewed as a validation of her practice, and how other viewpoints on issues were able to support it:

... it's getting you to see both sides, you can have your opinion but it's seeing why other people think what they think, or they don't agree with you know, a theory, or a way of thinking, do you see what I mean? The critiquing now is more, it's not a case of 'ohh yes I like this way... why?' And can I understand that actually he was disagreed with by so and so because, yeah I can see that as well, but actually... I think that that – that's very good (Tutorial 1, Mary, 2014a, Tutorial 1).

This was reiterated in the second tutorial:

[It is] more seeing theories in – identifying theories in children, and seeing 'oh yeah that's why they tick like that', so yeah it's been more observational, and me realising 'right well this child is, you know, something's happened here, and that's why they're... it's being more conscious of why their... development is where it is' (Mary, 2014b, Tutorial 2).

The purpose and value of the FdA for Mary is evidenced here. As practitioners working in the early years sector with young children, the impact of theory extends beyond the academic into professional practice.

Adulthood and mature adulthood provide the conditions for transformational learning (Illeris, 2014, p. 89). Key findings from this study include the value and

purpose of the participants' learning on their professional and academic lives and, in particular, the distinct propensity for transformational learning that these mature adults showed during their FdA programme. For many of the learners in this study, transformational learning was located in the dynamic change from unprincipled to principled knowledge (Bereiter, 2014) evident in the learners' narratives and in their academic work. The participants were adults, with three defined as mature adults (Amber, Philippa and Mary). These three participants scored in the top half of the overall grade average for written assignments across the sample (n=12). Amber, the oldest participant in the sample, was aged 51 when she started the programme and scored the highest average grade profile for written assignments (65.4%). Philippa showed the greatest development between year one and year two in grades, and achieved the highest FdA degree classification in the sample.

Conclusion

Motivation is a key aspect of transformational learning and, for adults, this motivation in learning is distinctly different to that of children (Illeris, 2002; Jones and Thomas, 2010). For adults, the powerful impetus to learn is intrinsic. Transformational learning takes place in adulthood where learners *choose* what they learn (Illeris, 2002and, therefore, ultimately have a greater readiness and orientation to learn. Adulthood and mature adulthood provide the conditions for transformational learning (Illeris, 2014, p. 89). The three mature adult learners (Amber, Philippa and Mary) were highly experienced in the early years sector and each demonstrated the 'libidinous' motivation that Illeris describes and the drive to overcome challenging emotions as part of their studies. The correlation between mature adults and transformational learning is important and interrelated with increased practice experience. In turn, this correlation indicates the value and purpose of the FdA in providing lifelong learning for those non-traditional students who may not have previously considered studying at university (QAA, 2015). As such, it should remain a core programme as part of the academic portfolio. Whilst these results are not generalisable beyond the FdA members who took part in this study, they do indicate that mature adulthood is a condition for transformational learning and warrants further exploration. An FdA programme has the capacity to afford mature, adult learners with the chance to undertake professional development and to respond to their 'libidinous' motivation to study.

Practice knowledge is at the heart of the programme and positioned centrally within teaching and assessments. However, where practice knowledge is analysed, evaluated and synthesised with theoretical understandings to become PPK (Bereiter, 2014, p. 4), I argue, it becomes a more worthy and powerful form of knowledge. It is powerful because it goes beyond any abstract knowledge held and retained within the academy and has the potential to affect the outcomes of young children through the practitioners in this study: it has intrinsic and extrinsic purpose. PPK is more than applied knowledge as it represents a more dynamic and complex form of understanding. Here, the concept of symbiosis is extended beyond

the learner and practice to include the academic tutor and, indeed, the university as a whole in creating PPK (Bereiter, 2014). Professional formation relies on theoretical understandings from the academy, and the academy relies on current practice knowledge from practitioners to create PPK, or as I argue, PPPK; purposeful, principled practice knowledge. This symbiotic relationship is mutually reliant and as such, the power balance is changed.

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