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Transformative teaching and learning through engaged practice: Lecturers' and students' experiences in a university and underserved-community partnership in Ireland

Abstract

The Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Lifeskills (CWell) program is a two-year community-driven program developed in partnership between an underserved-community in Limerick City, and staff at the University of Limerick (UL), Ireland. This paper explores the transformative teaching and learning experiences that arose throughout the duration of the progam for the lecturers and students. Data were collected through interviews and focus groups with lecturers and students involved in the program. Students supported the notion of "learning differently" and focused around prior learning and attitude to learning, learning about learning and impact of learning. Lecturers supported the notion of "teaching differently," focusing on how they had revised their usual teaching practices to more overtly emphasize the importance of culturally-responsive pedagogy and student-centered learning (as opposed to content-centered) and the situated learning perspective. There is a necessity for research on diverse and innovative programs to inform culturally-responsive pedagogies and transformation for learning.

Keywords: adult learning, transformative pedagogy, transformative education

Introduction

Sustaining healthier communities through community capacity building is widely acknowledged as an important community development strategy. The strength of community capacity building lies in the ability to empower community members as citizens to self-manage their lives and environment through acquisition of leadership skills and engagement in the

building and enactment of a shared community vision. It supports the belief that when empowered to do so, all people possess valuable skills, strengths, assets and knowledge that can contribute towards mobilising community vision into action.

Higher education institutes are increasingly being asked to foster wider social roles through public and community engagement (HEA, 2011; HEFCE, 2008). In addition, engagement with the wider community must become more firmly embedded in the mission of higher education institutes (HEA, 2011). Institutes are being called upon to respond positively to the continuing professional development needs of the wider community to develop and deliver appropriate modules and programs in a flexible and responsive way.

Integrating health within strategies to improve community wellbeing is well recognised. The need to promote the principles and practice of community development in improving health and well-being for disadvantaged communities, and to explore mechanisms for effective, meaningful and sustainable community participation in decision-making related to health has been identified (Combat Poverty Agency, 2008). The European Union Commission refers to the need for universities to communicate the relevance of their activities by sharing knowledge with society and by reinforcing dialogue with all stakeholders (CEC, 2006). In Ireland, the Hunt Report is the first major policy statement to give civic engagement equal prominence with the teaching/learning and research functions of higher education (Lyons & McIlrath, 2011). According to this statement, engagement with the wider community must become more firmly embedded in the social and economic contexts of the communities that higher education institutes live in and serve (Hunt, 2011). This will enable higher educational institutes to become more relevant and responsive to their communities and will also enrich their diversity and distinctiveness as institutions.

Even though the concept of transformative learning has gained a considerable position in North America, it has still only to a limited extent been spread into other parts of the world (Illeris, 2017). While much of the literature on transformative learning theory in the area of adult education continues to focus on either formal higher education settings (e,g, Bhukhanwala, Dean & Troyer, 2017)) or community settings (e.g., Maslin-Ostrowski et al., 2017), research on transformative learning through a university-community partnership remains sparse. Educators concerned with understanding culture and learning broadly, but especially in the area of social transformation and improving the well-being of communities, are calling for more creative, deliberate, and consequential interventions (Bang, Faber, Gurneau, Marin & Soto, 2016). Participation and participatory approaches in education, such as the Diploma in Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Lifeskills (CWell), have emerged as a means of recognising and shifting power structures and contributing to social change and transformation (Allahwala et al., 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the transformative teaching and learning experiences that arose throughout the duration of a two-year community-driven program which was developed in partnership between an underserved-community and staff at a university. It is anticipated that this study will contribute to the transformative learning literature by exploring the extent to which the features of transformative learning can be upheld in an underserved-community and university co-constructed program. Before reporting the methods and results from the study, an overview and pedagogical philosophy of the specific program is shared. This is followed by exploring literature on transformative learning and, specifically, the work of Jack Mezirow.

Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Lifeskills (CWell) program

The Diploma program CWell was developed by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences in the University of Limerick (UL), in conjunction with St. Mary's Community, an underserved area in Limerick City.Social determinants of health in this underserved community in Limerick City, Ireland, suggest extreme disadvantage (Fitzgerald, 2007). St. Mary's community is one of four underserved areas in Limerick City that is the focus of a regeneration process with the goal of making the area a safer and more prosperous place for its residents (Blackett / Limerick Regeneration Agency, 2008). The area is the oldest inner-city community in Limerick City, the fourth largest city in Ireland. Statistics indicate that, compared to the State averages, it has the highest prevalence of early school leaving at 55%, which is over five times the national average. Unemployment is almost double the national average at 72%, with 10% of this community unable to work due to sickness / disability which is over three times that of the State figure. Despite a range of ad hoc, one-off interventions, no sustainable plan has been implemented to address these problems, nor has the community been included in the interventions. In addition, there is little evidence on project outcomes/impacts (Blackett/Limerick Regeneration Agency, 2008). In a 2016 public study, St. Mary's was highlighted as the most deprived area in Ireland (Haase & Pratschke, 2016).

The program evolved to enable both the community and UL staff and students to work collaboratively and build capacity in well-being and lifestyle education within the local community. The focus is to engage *with* the community, supporting them to develop projects utilizing community resources, rather than imposing solutions *on* them without their involvement. A joint management structure is in place with equal community/university representation on the program steering group. The co-course director is a community representative, elected to the role by the local community. The aim of this educational

intervention is to address community health issues in a way that enhances existing strengths, fosters community resilience and leadership, facilitates access to further education, promotes greater social and economic inclusion and supports people to help themselves. The program content includes the three pillars of (i) mental health, (ii) physical health, and (iii) personal and professional development. CWell information sessions were provided in the local community. The ten candidates who were accepted onto the program described themselves as "community activists" or "workers" engaged in activities conducive to good health and well-being. All students were interested in developing leadership skills, improving their knowledge on health and well-being and fostering stronger social connectedness in their own community. Seven principles guide the CWell program and these are denoted in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The CWell program is structured as a two-year full-time program or four-year part-time program and is delivered in the evenings or at other suitable times which take account of the occupational and personal needs of its students as well as those delivering modules. All modules are required modules. The first year consists of four modules of lectures/seminars, practical assignments, and workshops/role-plays. The modules run consecutively with two during semester one and two during semester two. Project or field work through practical application of knowledge forms part of each module with the modules being closely integrated and each supporting the other. The second year of study reflects year one course delivery while the remaining module in semester one and semester two is Practicum Module 1 and Practicum Module 2 respectively. In this regard, students have an opportunity to undertake service learning as an integrated program component. Table 1 provides a summary of the focus of each module.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The program content includes the three pillars of (i) mental health, (ii) physical health and (iii) personal and professional development and three cross-cutting themes are addressed within this framework, (a) the young person, (b) middle age and (c) and the older person (see Figure 2). While specific pillars and themes may be more evident in some modules over others, there are instances where all three pillars and three themes have the potential to reside within one module. An example of this would be the Practicum modules where students are looking to incorporate their experience of the three pillars and three cross-cutting themes into a practical experience that encourages community-wide involvement.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The program was delivered in a dedicated educational space owned by the city council in the heart of St. Mary's community. This space was located adjacent to the local community center and was known and accessible to all course participants. The CWell program continues to be jointly funded by the university and local city council and is to be expanded to be offered to five areas of disadvantage in Limerick City in the next academic year. The program is now more strongly aligned to the university's mission in community engaged learning and research.

Pedagogical philosophy of the CWell program

While transformative learning theory (to be discussed in due course) was a critical aspect of the program framework, three specific philosophies of pedagogy framed the program – situated learning, co-creation of knowledge and learning as an active process. A decision was made early in the curriculum design process to embed CWell in a situated learning philosophy. This requires that the student be placed at the center of the learning process and that learning be rooted in activity, context and culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated learning focuses on participation in groups and situations that allow learners to become aware of, and eventually

contribute to, the generation of knowledge relevant to them. Lave and Wenger (1991) called these "communities of practice" (CoP). CoP theory is now well established (Tight, 2015; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) and is described as groups of people who share a concern or a passion about something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Situated learning encourages participative teaching environments in which knowledge is created through the interaction of the learner with others and the environment (Stein, 1998). Students learn through activities, rather than knowledge transfer, and the context of learning echoes real-world experiences for which students are being prepared. Stein (1998, p. 2) lists four main characteristics of situated learning: (i) Learning is grounded in the actions of everyday situations, (ii) Knowledge is acquired situationally and transfers only to similar situations, (iii) Learning is the result of a social process encompassing ways of thinking, perceiving, problem solving, and interacting in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge, and (iv) Learning is not separated from the world of action but exists in robust, complex, social environments made up of actors, actions, and situations. This pedagogical approach was chosen as most suited to a program which aimed to build on existing capacity and graduate community leaders with a wealth of relevant knowledge and skills.

Inventive curriculum design, embedded in communities, creates new perspectives that can ripple through and change community practices (Heard, 2014). This design approach, adopted by CWell, positions curriculum planners, lecturers, community members, and students as co-authors in knowledge making, acknowledging that self-authorship is central to a twenty-first-century tertiary education (Heard, 2014). Students are no longer viewed as passive consumers of third level education but instead should be considered by educators as co-creators

of knowledge and drivers of social change (Magolda, 2004). Inventive design in this way actively encourages designers to pose questions that disturb the boundaries of established values and practices in the field. There is less emphasis on provision of knowledge and instead inventive design focuses instruction on bigger questions that require students to recognize the limits of their own skills and knowledge.

Learning is understood as an active process where we learn by engaging in activity and from reflecting on this process (Kolb, 1984). What students learn is not stable and fixed, but instead outcomes are difficult to predict and what has been learnt may be difficult to define and to understand (Engestrom, 2001). Course content and the activities students engage in are embedded in ordinary real world, authentic learning experiences. Student learning activities can be complex and ill-defined, and echo the same complexity found in real-world tasks (Herrington, Reeves, Oliver & Woo, 2004). Consequently, flexibility around how and what learning occurs is necessary.

Cognizant of the centrality of pedagogy, those involved in delivering the CWell program were prompted to re-examine and rethink the most effective way in which they could connect and interact with the students. This resulted in the development of the most effective pedagogy over time, dependent on the specific circumstances and contexts that were presented. A "culturally-responsive" pedagogy / teaching (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009) provides a lens through which the lecturers could best consider their practices in striving to include students' cultural references in all aspects of learning;

A culturally responsive pedagogy builds on the premise that how people are expected to go about learning may differ across cultures (…) Cultural differences present both opportunities and challenges for teachers. To maximize learning opportunities, teachers

must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into instructional practice (Villegas, 1991, p. 13).

The interest of the lecturers in this study was to contribute to the call for more work on considering the extent to which the implementation of culturally-responsive pedagogy and associated practices impacted the teaching and learning experiences of the lecturers and students respectively (Sleeter, 2012).

This paper now focuses on transformative learning as an appropriate conceptual framework for understanding what transformation means within the actions of adult learning related to the CWell program, for both the lecturers and students attached to the program. The methods of the study will then be shared before exploring the insights and experiences of lecturers and students engaged in the program.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory is a useful framework in which to understand the adult students' and lecturers' learning and teaching actions on the CWell program. Mezirow's (1978) work represented a distinct understanding of what transformation means within the actions of adult learning, viewing knowledge as something that is constructed by the individual in relation with others (i.e., other students and lecturers). According to Cranton and Carusetta (2004, p.6), transformative learning is a "process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated."

Given that reflection, critical reflection and critical self-reflection were central to the CWell program, we believe that Mezirow's work is best suited to frame the study. As Dirkx (1998) explains in referring to Mezirow's work, "Through critical reflection (...) we come to

identify, assess, and possibly reformulate key assumptions on which our perspectives are constructed" (p.4). Reflection and dialogue are key elements of transformative learning, encouraging learners to consider (and change where appropriate) (i) the way they interpret their experience, and in turn transform the view of themselves, and (ii) interactions, and in turn how they interact with others and their environment. It is these two elements of transforming the self and interactions with others that we thread throughout the results and discussion sections of this paper.

A specific interest of this paper is to share the pedagogical implications related to transformative learning, cognizant that, "a critical dimension of such a pedagogy is honoring and giving voice to the expressive aspects of our experience, manifest largely in symbolic forms within our daily lives" (Dirkx, 1998, p. 8). To support transformative learning, learners / students and educators / lecturers are expected to work with each other to construct more meaningful and holistic visions that lead to a deeper sense of one's self as a person. Mezirow (1997) goes as far as to suggest that the educator / lecturer works themselves out of the job of authority figure to become a co-learner by progressively transferring their leadership to the group of learners as it becomes more self-directive. For transformative learning to be successful, it is essential that the pedagogical practices understand and acknowledge the social, political and cultural context in which the learners reside.

The purpose of this study is to explore the transformative teaching and learning experiences of students and lecturers involved in a co-constructed two-year community-driven program which was developed in partnership between an underserved-community and staff at a university.

Methods

Participants

Lecturers: The CWell modules were taught by 11 lecturers from across the six Departments residing in the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences. In addition to teaching on the CWell program, many CWell lecturers served on the CWell Curriculum Design Committee which subsequently became the CWell Steering Committee once the program was underway. CWell lecturers also acted as advisers for individual CWell students during the course of their studies. This cross-faculty facilitation of a program was a unique opportunity which aimed for increased collaboration between staff of different Departments. Lecturers who agreed to contribute to teaching on the program were committed to delivering classes on Monday evenings between the hours of 6.30pm and 9.30pm.

Students: Ten students (8 female and 2 male) completed the CWell program and were awarded a Diploma-level qualification. The students ranged in ages from 28 to 59 years. The majority of students reported leaving school before completing final exams, with some having returned to education at a later date through completing certificated courses in a number of life-skill areas, e.g., computing, or university diploma courses in areas of interest to them. A series of information sessions were delivered at various venues at different dates and times in the lead up to the start of the program. While no specific population was targeted more than others, it was evident that these sessions were predominantly attended by women. As such, this was reflected in the final composition of the group enrolling on the program.

Interviews and focus groups

Focus groups were the preferred method of data collection from the lecturers and students on the premise that individuals would engage more if in a group. Interviews were conducted in instances where individuals were unable to attend the agreed focus group times.

All lecturers were contacted to ascertain their interest in contributing to an interview / focus group on their experiences of teaching on the program. Seven (6 Female and 1 male) of the 11 lecturers agreed to take part. Two focus groups (one with three lecturers and one with two lecturers) and two individual lecturer interviews took place on conclusion of the program. The interview / focus group protocol focused on motivations and the process of being involved in the program, challenges and rewards of program involvement and what individuals had learned about themselves through involvement in the program. All focus groups / interviews were conducted by the third author and took place at a time that mutually suited the lecturers and the third author. On average, one-to-one interviews lasted for 46 minutes and focus groups lasted for 64 minutes.

All students contributed to one-to-one interviews and / or focus groups throughout the program. Eleven focus groups and fifteen individual interviews were conducted with students over the two years. The interview / focus group protocols changed slightly as the program developed and core themes of the questions posed focused on their reactions and experiences to learning through the lectures, what was effective / less effective in their learning, challenges and opportunities that arose and their (continued) expectations and motivation for the program. All interviews and focus groups were conducted by either the third or fourth author, took place in the community space where students attended CWell classes and were arranged at times that mutually suited the students and the third or fourth author. On average, one-to-one interviews lasted for 30 minutes and focus groups lasted for 60 minutes.

Data analysis

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analysed inductively, borrowing from principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data analysis was undertaken using Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick (2008) method of analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data which included coding and categorisation. Interview / focus group transcripts were broken into data units. Each of these data units, comprising a single line or a collection of related lines of data, was assigned to one or more data categories (e.g. student outcomes, program organisation, partnership). Following this initial phase of categorisation, data units within each category were assigned one or more codes. For example, within the student outcomes category codes included knowledge and skills, attitudes to learning and personal development. A comparison within these categories and codes, as well as between these coded units and the original transcripts, resulted in the identification of overall trends and patterns related to the main components of transformative learning, e.g., interpreting one's own experience, transforming one's view of themselves, interactions with others and interactions with the environment. The most salient have been represented in the results section. In instances where direct quotes are used, each is referenced to the specific individual (L denotes a lecturer, S denotes a student and FG denotes a focus group).

A number of steps recommended by Creswell (2012) were taken to increase the trustworthiness of findings. During the data collection stage, participants were given the opportunity to verify information shared during ongoing or previous interviews and focus groups by such questions as "Did I understand you correctly when you said…?" or "Am I correct in thinking that…?" During the data analysis phase, any data which contradicted emerging trends were given careful consideration in the context of the given interview and the entire data corpus.

The trustworthiness of the data was further increased by the opportunity the research design afforded to triangulate data from different sources with respect to similar phenomena.

Results

Transformative learning theory was chosen to frame the reporting of findings in this paper because, across all focus groups and interviews, participants made frequent comparisons between their thoughts, words and behaviors prior to, and following, their CWell experience. Transformation was the strongest overarching theme in the data. We reported the point earlier in this paper that reflection and dialogue are key elements of transformative learning, encouraging learners to consider (and change where appropriate) (i) the way they interpret their experience, and in turn transform the view of themselves, and (ii) interactions, and in turn how they interact with others and their environment. We use these two elements of transformative learning to frame the results from lecturers and students. The results are presented in two sections, teaching differently and learning differently.

Teaching differently

The teaching strategies used by the lecturers allow us to describe how lecturers were motivated to utilise culturally-responsive pedagogy to facilitate transformational change.

(i)   Interpretation and transformation

This student-focused culturally-responsive approach to knowledge acquisition was a required lecturer skill. Lecturers were unanimous in their view that the curriculum needed to be responsive and that *"flexibility and support was critical" (L7)* if a transformational model of teaching is to be successful. Thus, knowledge was viewed by the lecturers as a broader construct

(than purely acquisition) that encompasses knowledge that impacts on the whole person. An aspect of this was that they favoured the approach of educating for personal development;

> *Sometimes the content was actually the least part of what we were teaching. We were teaching them* [students] *how to engage across the board. Life skills, yeah, they have to learn how to communicate with themselves and others, absolutely. So it was almost sort of like the hidden curriculum if you will (L4).*

The majority of lecturers had formed the view that knowledge acquisition in CWell was relevant to the student population. There were some concerns about CWell's uniqueness in measuring personal knowledge compared to other comparable university programs' academic requirements. Lecturers were challenged with moving beyond the status quo and considering culturally-responsive pedagogy;

> *I don't know to what extent we have compromised a level seven* [classification of award] *to get them* [students] *through the program (...) we've gone very much with the situated learning piece in that they have to determine, it has to be in their context and they had to determine what they were capable of doing (...) but I find myself caught because I think am I setting them up for a fall? (L4).*

Thus acquisition of instrumental knowledge required further exploration in terms of measuring knowledge acquisition, construction and translation and was aptly summarised by one lecturer;

> *It's a level seven* [classification of Quality and Qualifications Ireland award] *in a different way. If we're looking at engaged scholarship, we've got to look at knowledge acquisition, the amount of knowledge and the level of knowledge that one can present back to you, that is one focus. Another way is knowledge acquisition and construction and what's done with*

the knowledge in terms of how it's translated into practice which is in real time. That's a whole other ball game (L8).

(ii)   Interactions

Lecturers strived to deliver learning that was meaningful for the students and situated in the context of life-skills enhancement. The teaching approach for all lecturers was "*strongly orientated towards application to the needs and lives of the community" (L1)*, i.e., a consideration of how best to enact culturally-responsive pedagogy This required a degree of negotiation of learning outcomes between lecturers and students and teaching;

getting their [student] *voices as opposed to my own. That's what I learned with them. I needed to get their voice, because there was no learning unless it was their voice and there was no learning unless the outcomes of the course were implanted into their way of living and doing business (L7).*

Learning differently

Across the two elements of (i) interpretation and transformation and (ii) interactions, students reflected on their prior learning and previous attitudes to learning, learning about learning and the impact of learning.

(i)   Interpretation and transformation

There were a number of instances where students alluded to the negative school practices they had experienced as young children, leaving them presently surprised on how the culturally-responsive pedagogies enforced through the CWell program represented a more favorable, safe and welcoming engagement with education;

I think myself when we were at school you were always told you were stupid and everything else, you were thrown down to the back of the class (...) Whereas here everyone was equal and there was no question stupid. They made that very clear at the very beginning (FG1).

There was a clear relief for students when they discovered that the ways in which they would each learn differed and that this would be accommodated for;

The very first night, I was sitting there as nervous as hell and as the night progressed, [the lecturer] *discussed the different learning styles and when she was talking I felt that one of them said 'Oh, that's you, that's you' and it was a great sense of relief to me because I had my own way. It was just a complete revelation to me to discover my learning style* (S.2.2).

The impact of the learning experiences was clearly conveyed by students in noting their development in growing and learning. An increase in confidence in being able to learn was a growth shared by many and no more than Amy who alluded to this point across the three times she was interviewed;

I wouldn't have great confidence in myself. You can do something, you're not stupid. 'Cos I was always led to believe that I was stupid at school (S.1.2) (…) *I had forgotten about me and me as a person and forgotten everything. I was just on a track going one way. Now I see the bigger picture, learning and confidence is much better at work and my confidence is much better* (S.2.1) (…) *I forgot I was me and because I had low confidence in school, I always felt I was stupid and I couldn't do anything but now I am not stupid (...) I have learned to put my point across but then again everybody is entitled*

> *to their opinion (…) if one person says one thing and I say another, it doesn't mean that*
>
> *they are right and I am wrong or I am right and they are wrong. That's what*
>
> *community's about, everyone's entitled* (S.3.2).

An increase in confidence had influenced a number of individual's work life with an admittance that they could now *"stand up for myself"* (S.3.2) as regards having a voice and refusing to work more hours than others. This was somewhat aligned with the feeling of bettering themselves, *"We are getting selfish now, bettering myself and never mind anyone else"* (S.1.2).

There was evidence that the improved confidence levels and new skill sets of the students acquired through the CWell program were already positively impacting their work, family contexts and local community organizations;

> *I feel I am more confident in myself and when CWell started, I was just after being*
>
> *elected onto* [committee name] *of* [community initiative name]. *Now I find with CWell*
>
> *behind me, I can contribute more to meetings. Whereas before I was quiet, now I am*
>
> *contributing more* (S.2.2).

There was also an acknowledgement from students that what they had been exposed to through the program were life skills that related back to their lives and the community. Students indicated that they felt more empowered and had a greater clarity regarding their role as agents to lead and sustain change in their community. In addition, while students acknowledged the existence of perceived negative or different mindsets in their community, they expressed an understanding of how they could work effectively with others as representatives for their community *"We live here and it's our home and if we don't do it, nobody else is going to do it. You can't wait for*

outsiders to come in. You live there so you have to start from the ground up. We are proud of

where we live" (S.2.1).

Students also began to appreciate listening to the community and what they would

suggest would benefit the local community which was a main aim of the program, *"We could*

decide we want to do this, that and the other thing (…) We will wait and see what they want, then

we can decide, 'Well that's a good idea. We should go with that one'' (S.2.2).

On being prompted to consider their future upon completing the program, students reported

that they "were not finished" with their learning and development, with every intention of

remaining active in their surrounding community. As one student commented, *"Ye only planted*

the seeds, we have to grow the flowers" (FG1).

(ii)   Interactions

There was an appreciation for an honest and considered staff-student relationship throughout the

learning process; which developed to allow for a shared voice on how modules should run. A

collaborative approach between lecturers and students was fostered throughout CWell which

allowed for a shared voice on how modules should run, including student input to learning

approaches and assessment methods, *"We actually had a voice, they* [lecturers] *came in and they*

listened to us and they took our opinion on board and it did get changed around after that so"

(FG2). There was a level of appreciation that teamwork played a crucial role in enabling students

achieve their learning outcomes, *"it's a group more so than breaking off into individual people*

(…) everyone actually listened to each other (…) you just respect other people and their

opinions" (S.3.2). However, some students suggested that their colleagues struggled with

learning through group interaction, indicating they may have lost out on a more enriched

learning experience. They were conscious that not everyone engaged equally with the tasks that were set and individuals learned to resign themselves to such instances, *"It's up to them what they want to get out of it (...) I got what I got out of it. That's their problem if they didn't get it (...) I can't force people to get what I have been getting out of it"* (S.3.2).

Working together as a group appeared to be one of the strongest impacts on students increasing confidence, *"the support that we give each other I think really helps with the confidence"* (FG2). For one student, the impact of learning to work as part of a group was immense;

> *I suppose the big learning curve for me really was (...) learning to work as part of a group really because sometimes I felt that I should have said things and maybe I was too passive and other times then maybe I should have ... be careful how I said it. Now I am much more aware how I communicate to be honest (...)* (S.2.2).

The impact that learning about communication had on students was evident. This included improved presentation skills, *"The more times I get up doing the presentation, I am feeling more and more confident every time. It's to do with the course so far anyway"* (S.2.2), and one to one communication skills, *"I find I am speaking to more people out there now that I wouldn't have spoken to"* (S.2.2). Students also learned how to manage conflict effectively,

> *I find if you think of what you want to say first, because before I wouldn't and I would just say it and I'd get all excited then and I'd start roaring and shouting then. But just think about what you want to say first. It only takes a second and then say it* (S.2.2).

Discussion

We make three observations on the way in which the evolving program strived to authentically allow for transformative teaching and learning experiences through the enactment of culturally-responsive pedagogy. There was a consensus in the lecturers' narratives that former ways of teaching gave way to an emphasis on flexibility, support and a focus on holism. There was evidence of considerable reflection by lecturers on the ethics of teaching for content. Lecturers moved to learn to negotiate a social conscious in their approach and, as a consequence, culturally-responsive pedagogy. This emphatic approach is a critical aspect of transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2012) and requires that boundaries between the teacher and learner be diffused. Such a social consciousness allowed for unexpected outcomes that resulted in shifts in consciousness (Durant, Carlon & Downs, 2017) not only for the lecturers but also the students.

Educators not only taught with cultural relevance in their approach, but also adopted a philosophy of education that incorporated social reconstructionism and transformative learning (Miller Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016) through the integration of learning outcomes and assessments with activities that resulted in positive impact on the course participants as well as the wider community. Program content relevancy, which was a critical focus for both lecturers and students, is an essential element associated with transformative learning (Choy, 2009).

An interesting aspect of the transformation process was how the students emphasized personal change more so than social change. Students revealed how they shifted from old ways of thinking to a new understanding and appreciation of their personal abilities, supporting the belief that transformative learning can occur through learning activities that highlight changes in student perceptions (Walker & Molnar, 2013). Transforming points of view and transforming habits of mind (mentioned in due course) are central to how Mezirow (2000) conceives learning. Shifts in identity were also associated with disputes between lecturers and students when challenges

occurred in terms of the learning experiences. In a similar vein, Hyland-Russell and Syrnyk (2015, p.515) refer to the transformative aspect of challenging change as "demanding and vexing aspects" and this is particularly associated with transformative learning among marginalized adult learners.

A strong focus and exposure to communicative learning led to a heightened appreciation of interactions between the students, lecturers and the wider context. We note three observations here.

Discourse was a central part of the lecturers' drive in addressing how best to educate for personal development, and particularly through the concept of communicating effectively. Lecturers appreciated that discourse is a social process (Dirkx, 1998). It was clear from student comments that they had become aware and critical of their own communication behavior, having been assisted by lectures on how to participate in discourse. The lecturers' caution in claiming to what extent the program had resulted in the acquisition of instrumental knowledge was due to the extraordinary amount of time and energy that was provided for communicative learning (Mezirow, 1997). This focus on imparting instrumental knowledge versus accommodating the holistic engagement of the person to learn how to learn and what matters to them was a continual challenge for the lecturers. This forced lecturers to reflect on their own pedagogical philosophies and practices and strive to adopt strategies that could effectively foster transformative learning within their own practice. Such different ways of educating could become triggers for the lecturers' transformative learning about teaching.

Learning to work as part of a team challenged lecturers and students to consider the most effective way in which to have a voice and communicate, with a main challenge of communicative learning involving reaching a consensus (Mezirow, 1997). There was evidence that through reflection and dialogue, students had begun to transform the view of themselves as

well as interact more successful with others and their environment. Supporting the work of others (Cranton & Kasl, 2012; Dirkx, 2000; Taylor, 2001), it was evident in working with the students that transformative learning raised awareness of specific (perhaps unwarranted) habits, examined that habit through discourse with others and, in some instances, resulted in changing that habit if desired.

Students conveyed an appreciation for the difference in relationship between lecturer and student compared to that which they had experienced at school between the teacher and student. The students strongly conveyed that they worked closely with each other and the lecturers in a bid to construct more meaningful and holistic visions that encouraged them to reflect on their own self. There is an appreciation that reflective questions that encourage students to move from lower cognitive ways of thinking to questions that encourage students to explore a more critical analysis of a situation increase the likelihood that a more transformative experience might occur (Hullender et al., 2015). There were instances where the lecturers became co-learners (Mezirow, 1997) in a bid to help learners become aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions. Evidence of cooperation between lecturers and students was highlighted as a significant factor for a more authentic student engagement with the learning and the possibility for genuinely transformative learning experiences. Cooperation was viewed as more than a will to change existing practices and structures. It was also about a change in mind-set and attitude to the nature of learning itself, understood as an experiential process of reflection and transformation in relation to oneself and with others (HEA, 2014).

Conclusion

It is clear from this study of the CWell program that students value supportive and collaborative relationships with teachers (Brookfield, 2005). Such a relationship is captured by the term

"reciprocal teaching" (Hattie, 2009), whereby learning is supported by conversations between teacher and students to gain meaning from subject and context, leading to both groups working together in a jointly constructed approach (Bishop, 2003). This supports Mezirow's (1978; 2000) central view of knowledge as something that is constructed by the individual in relation with others (i.e., other students and teachers/lecturers).

Cognizant of the centrality of culturally-responsive pedagogy, those involved in delivering the CWell program were prompted to re-examine and rethink the most effective way in which they could connect and interact with the students. This, in turn, perhaps prompts us to consider the centrality of valuing what we teach in favor of teaching what we value. Boyer (1990) redefined scholarly work as using rich university resources to address crucial community and social problems. He strongly argued in favor of higher education's return to its roots of teaching students to be fully engaged and socially responsible citizens.

 Boyer (1990) conveys the scholarship of engagement as connecting higher education resources with the most pressing ethical, civic, and social issues. Transformative learning, such as that evidenced in this study, may require educators to challenge the somewhat limited "engaged practice" that is evident in education systems. This can be achieved by introducing culturally-responsive teaching and learning approaches that not only focus on the individual / student from the very start but also involves them in the co-construction of their learning experiences. This in turn requires educators to have a strong knowledge of their own philosophies, skills and abilities and knowledge of students that both inform the preferred culturally-responsive pedagogies and allow for co-construction of the curriculum. CWell is a program that strives to centralize and support such a scholarship of engagement.

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