

# Transformative Learning: Positive Identity Through Prison-Based Higher Education in England and Wales

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## ABSTRACT

On entering prison, prisoners lose their home, their possessions and their very identity as a person, becoming just a number. Transformative learning through Prison-based Higher-level Distance Learning (PHDL) can be the vehicle by which prisoners begin to find a new positive identity as a student. This article argues that PHDL, post-secondary self-study using distance-learning materials, is potentially transformative, leading to positive changes in personal and social identity and making a positive difference to learners' lives during and after incarceration. The study on which this article is based, investigates perceptions of transformative learning for ex-prisoners and prisoners (men and women) who were due for release from 10 prisons in England and Wales. Using the 'voices' of the participants, this article describes their learning journeys, the motivation to study and the network of support required to overcome the extreme difficulties of study in prison. Although results varied from prison to prison, participation in PHDL produced psychological outcomes including, increased self-awareness, positive identity and resilience. The article concludes that PHDL encourages positive personal change in incarcerated students through transformative learning, with raised hope and realistic aspirations for continuation of learning, employment and a brighter future upon release.

## KEYWORDS

Higher Education, Hope, Positive Social Identity, Resilience, Student Identity, Transformative Learning, UK Prisons

*Education is transformational because it gives you hope, which is all that I ask for. - Jed, male incarcerated student, 40-49*

## INTRODUCTION

A review of the relevant literature which defines identity, suggests that although the prison is understood as an environment in which identity may be disassembled (see Goffman, 1968), there is a lack of research which specifically investigates how transformative learning may affect identity in the prison context. With only 1 per cent of the funded curriculum in prison at a higher, post-secondary level (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2012), higher level education, mostly relies on self-study with distance-learning providers such as the Open University. The limited research on Prison-based

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Higher-level Distance Learning (PHDL) suggests that it may be 'transformative' (Mezirow, 1997). This article fills a gap in that literature by identifying the transformative factors and their effect on the student-prisoners' sense of self and aspirations for the future.

The study on which this article is based is part of a longitudinal study from 2010 to 2013 (see Pike, 2014). This article is based on the in-prison phase of the study which includes participant observation and multiple individual, face-to-face, interviews with 51 male and female prisoners within 10 prisons in England and Wales, as well as individual interviews with 10 ex-prisoner students. Overall, this study highlights factors which enable Prison-based Higher-level Distance Learning (PHDL) to be 'transformative,' with a potential to lead to personal change. The positive outcomes of that personal change being increased self-awareness, the ability to critically reflect, development of a positive student identity with raised hopes and strong, realistic aspirations for a different future upon release.

The article unashamedly uses many quotes from the participants to tell the story of positive personal change, but also tells of the support of 'significant others' who help participants to overcome some of the many difficulties to successfully complete post-secondary education through distance-learning in a prison environment. The article emphasises the importance of the learning environment and the differences in learning across the ten prisons. The concept of a 'learning' prison is developed (see Pike and Adams, 2012), which highlights the participants' perceptions of a good supportive environment which actively supports PHDL and nurtures a learning culture which increases the potential for transformative learning.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE THEORY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING**

This article adopts the theory of transformative learning, as a potential conceptual framework for understanding how adults learn. It then explores the potential of adult higher learning in prisons in the UK through a transformative learning lens. Transformative learning can be defined as 'a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better justified (Cranton, 2006, p. vi).'

The theory of transformative learning was first developed in the United States in 1978 by Jack Mezirow after he investigated the factors which impeded and facilitated women's progress into higher education through re-entry programmes (Mezirow, 2000b). The findings suggested that the women who participated in the programmes had undergone a perspective transformation in their personal development by becoming more critically aware of their beliefs and feelings about themselves and their role in society. Influenced by Habermas (1984), Mezirow (1991) differentiated between instrumental learning and dialogic (or communicative) learning. He considered instrumental learning to be task-oriented problem-solving for improved performance while dialogic learning involved critically assessing what was being communicated, enabling the learner to recognise unquestioned assumptions and beliefs which they have held since childhood. In turn, this could lead to self-reflective learning, if the learner is able to internalise the reasons for the new perspective.

Self-reflective learning, related to the adult learner's identity, psycho-social history and potential for individual and social change, was fundamental to transformative learning. The self-reflective learner is presented with an alternative way of seeing themselves and the world around them. Self-reflective learning, in itself, was not considered transformational but it could lead to transformation (Brookfield, 2000; Cranton and Hoggan, 2012; Mezirow, 1985, 1997, 2000a). Mezirow (2003) proposed that under certain circumstances a perspective transformation could occur where transformative learning moves the learner from a 'taken-for-granted frame of reference' (p. 59) towards a more discriminating and reflective frame of reference which could fit with their new knowledge and experiences. Transformation is normally a gradual process during which the learner was made aware of alternative perspectives but it may occur suddenly such as in a personal crisis (Mezirow, 1985, 1997). A prison sentence could be just such a personal crisis.

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