

Spaces for learning: restor(y)ing identities and perspectives through reflective autobiography

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Abstract

Lifelong learning reforms encourage adults to return to study, while providers seek to promote learning outcomes that meet economic imperatives in an increasingly competitive market. Yet the features of adult learning spaces that are mostly discussed in the literature relate to physical structure and architectural design, or to distance and mobility. There is less research on the space in social and interpersonal terms and the impact on vocational learning and kinds of new knowing that emerges. This paper uses Nonaka and Konno's notion of 'Ba' (Nonaka & Konno, 1998) to understand adult learner's experience of returning to study. I report on the findings of a qualitative research project that used narrative methodologies to understand the lived experience, learning and identity work amongst five adults who returned to study for a Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualification. Reflecting on the learning of their lives, they reveal a significance of meaning making within the context of this adult learning space that resonates with Nonaka's argument for Ba as an emergent foundation for relationships and knowledge creation. I argue that the examination of a life lived provides a platform where individuals can gain understanding about their relationships with the world around them.

Introduction

This paper begins by describing the background of research on adults returning to study within the learning spaces of vocational education and training, introducing Nonaka and Konno's notion of 'Ba' as applied within the domain of organisational knowledge management, to portray the characteristics of honouring spaces of learning and personal knowledge creation. It explores the use of story as a tool for drawing out the phenomenological lived experience of participants as they engage with the spaces of Ba to critique constructed knowledge of self, and using the framework of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (2000), relates the transformative and emancipatory learning spaces described by Freire and Shor (1986) to the re-shaping and re-forming of knowledge of self that were catalysts to imagining and expressions of new life possibilities.

Vocational education and training is not traditionally designed or recognised for its transformative role and potential. In the work-dominated discourse of VET, it is commonly and officially assumed that vocational education and training, as the name suggests, is directed towards preparation for work or developing skills for employment. The current interrogation of learning spaces within vocational education and training emerges from a broader global focus on educational quality and expediency (Brooks, Fuller, & Waters, 2012; Oblinger, 2006), and as providers seek to promote quality learning outcomes that also meet economic imperatives in an increasingly competitive market (TDA, 2013), the VET sector, deeply grounded in a competency-based approach, seeks and values quantifiable outcomes to satisfy policy and practice. As this relates to the impact on vocational learning, a growing body of research explores the concept and function of learning spaces through the lens of physical structure and architectural design, or related to the challenges of distance-proximity and stretched spaces in learning mobility (Seddon, 2010). Much less research however focuses on the nature of these

spaces as they relate to the social and intrapersonal learning that emerges; the conditions that foster critical reflections on life and learning, and the influence of new knowing.

Drawing on the literature reviewed here, on my own experience as a learning and development educator within the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector, and on the diverse range of vocational contexts, students and teachers with whom I've worked over the years, it is apparent to me that the knowing, self-identity and perceived capability we construct and carry of ourselves holds the strongest influence on our ability to engage with and transcend the challenges of returning to the formal spaces of learning. Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000) speaks about the disorienting dilemmas that can emerge when our familiar knowing is challenged, and for many the conditions fostered within the learning spaces of VET play a critical role in cultivating their success or failure to thrive in learning.

Both as an educator of those who facilitate the vocational learning of their students, and through my own ongoing learning and professional development, I have worked in diverse environments that have included fitness and personal training, leisure and recreation, hairdressing and Aged Care, even parenthood with all its associations of supporting the growth and expansion of the citizenship of my own and other's children. Within each of these contexts along my learning and career pathway, story has played a foundational role in supporting the emerging understanding of individuals and their place in the world. My knowing of the transformative power of narrative has emerged over many years, but I have come to know that stories matter, that telling one's story, one's autobiography, transforms learning and lives (Brady, 1990; Miles, 2011).

Against this background, in recent research (Miles, 2011) narrative methodologies were used to unpack and examine the phenomenological lived experience, learning and identity work of a small group of adults returning to study within the learning spaces of a Victorian TAFE institute. Through the autobiographical telling of their (hi)story, participants were invited to explore and unpack uncontested knowing, to consider the experiences, people and environments that had contributed to the shaping of their sense of self, and to the expectation they subsequently had of themselves and their future capacity. Van Manen (1997) proposes that when using the phenomenological lens to view experience as it is lived, a perspective founded in thoughtfulness is adopted in pursuing the reality of one's inquiry (Heidegger, 1962). He sees phenomenology as a tradition rather than a method of research (Van Manen 1997, p30) that seeks to gain a philosophical understanding as opposed to scientific knowledge of being in the world (ibid, p22). Van Manen describes research undertaken through a phenomenological perspective as a quest to understand the way people experience the world in which they live to uncover the essential elements of 'being' and establish individual meaning-making (ibid, p5). Generalisability is therefore not an aim of this qualitative research.

The purpose of my research was to further explore anecdotal findings in my own practice and to determine if others had experienced and documented outcomes related to the use of narrative inquiry through a phenomenological lens, utilising a Transformative Learning theoretical framework in adult learners returning to study within the learning spaces of vocational education and training. The aim was to uncover the contexts within which research may have taken place; to establish what findings have emerged, and to identify opportunities for further research related to the following questions:

- In what ways can telling and reflecting on their stories provide adult learners returning to study with a greater knowledge of self that may foster a richer engagement in the learning process, build learner self-identity and potentially promote more beneficial learning and vocational outcomes?

- What are the implications of these findings for pedagogic practice within the VET sector?

The methods – recruitment, participants and interviews

The original research plan was to locate adult learners newly returned to study at the TAFE Institute in which I worked, and to facilitate their engagement in the reflective process of storytelling as part of a reintroduction to learning. At the conclusion of this session, I would explain my research and invite them to consider volunteering as a participant. Ethics approval was requested both through the university, and at the TAFE institute, the site of the research. Access was requested to cohorts that included those undertaking Indigenous Studies, the Certificate in General Adult Education and migrant adults completing English Language and various vocational studies. The TAFE institute decided that the risks associated in working with the unique sensitivities of these groups was too great and I was eventually given permission to work with students enrolled in a Diploma of Liberal Arts, six months into their diploma course. Delays around the revised ethics approval resulted in access to a limited selection of students now in the second year of their diploma studies – a different cohort than that originally planned.

In consultation with the course coordinator a session was organised to facilitate discussion around the benefits of critical reflection within the context of the social sciences. As an invited guest speaker, with no power relationship or attachment to assessment processes, I encouraged them to unpack the notion of themselves as critically reflective practitioners using the process of storytelling, and to consider the experiences, environments and people that had contributed to their own learning pathway and constructed self-knowing. They wrote, drew, or utilised a combination of methods to express the story of their learning in a way most meaningful to them and continued to write and draw freely as thoughts arose during our continuing session on the value of reflection. Individuals were then invited to share any thoughts about the activity; any personal recognition that may have come to the fore for them; any potential benefits of the reflective exercise and its possible incorporation into their own applied practice.

At this point the proposed research was introduced and discussion was had about the potential risk that existed to emotional wellbeing through participation in the research. Participants were informed of support available as needed if they chose to participate. In response to my invitation, five volunteers came forward after the class and were provided with further information about the study. Explanatory Statements and Consent Forms were distributed, and after acceptance, the participants were asked to reflect further on their learning pathways, on their sense of identity as learners, and to give further consideration to the ways in which circumstances and environments may have influenced this construction of self-identity. They were encouraged to find ways of recording any meaningful reflections in the lead-up to ninety minute semi-structured individual interviews, clarified as providing the forum in which we would discuss their insights gained through the process of their reflective journey and where we could flesh out stories of how the transformative process had unfolded for each of them.

Interviews were conducted in locations identified by participants as uniquely comfortable to each of them, where they were invited to share the reflective process undertaken in the lead-up to the interview, and to explain the method they had chosen to express and record their reflections. Utilising a narrative methodology, each individual was encouraged to express the lived experience of their learning story in a way that was meaningful to them, and questions structured to draw out potential evidence of Mezirow's eleven phases of transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2012) were included where needed to guide reflections. Self-determination and freedom of expression was again explicitly highlighted to each individual as

we undertook the interviews, to give them permission to explore anything that they considered relevant to their learning story, and to promote a stream-of-consciousness participation in the reflective exercise. Their right to exclude anything or to cease the interview at any point was also strongly articulated and reinforced both prior to and throughout the sessions.

Two weeks after the last individual interview took place, a focus group was held with three of the participants only, due to the unavailability of all participants at one time. Individual phone interviews were undertaken with the other two participants and interviews, both individual and group, were digitally recorded with supporting notes. In summary, primary data was drawn from my personal reflections on the process of facilitating the initial class session on reflection; one introductory session with the five voluntary participants; one individual interview with each of the five participants; one focus group with three participants, and two individual secondary phone interviews, on the autobiographical process and its capacity to foster greater personal understanding and potential perspective transformation.

Transformative learning, spaces of Ba and knowledge creation

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000) asserts that from a disorienting dilemma in life – an event that throws one off the familiar course of existence and knowing to that point – a process of self-examination emerges that causes the questioning of long held values, behaviours and world views. From this new questioning standpoint, a growing discontent and alienation can emerge from what have been traditionally accepted social norms and structures. A greater critical awareness of others, both within and outside of the individual's morphing view of the world ensues, that critiques and transcends previously accepted social roles and expectations, and the habitual ways in which these assumed roles have been enacted. Mezirow developed an eleven-phase process that frames this passage (Taylor & Cranton, 2012) and describes how reinterpretation and reconstruction of meaning attached to past experiences, and growing awareness that one's lived experience and discontent has been shared and acknowledged by others can support an openness and willingness to construct a new and unique frame of reference. Nelson (1994) speaks of these new frames of reference as supporting and guiding action that can take the individual beyond any previously perceived horizon of their expectations.

Against this framework, the stories and expressed perspective transformations of my five participants were mapped as they reflected on the learning of their lives. The personal, social and vocational dimensions of meaning-making that emerged within these spaces of learning are resonant with the concept of Ba, advanced by Nonaka (1998). Described by The Wall Street Journal as 'one of the most influential persons on business thinking' (Witzel & Warner, 2013), Nonaka's contributions around Ba as a space for knowledge creation are highly relevant both to learners and their emerging knowledge, and to our industry-driven VET sector. The Japanese concept of Ba translates roughly into the English word 'place' (Nonaka & Konno, 1998), and refers to a shared space for emerging relationships (p40). Space can be physical, virtual, mental, or any combination of the three, and is "conceived as the frame, made up of the borders of space and time, in which knowledge is activated as a resource for creation." (ibid, p41). Nonaka and Konno propose that for most Japanese, knowledge is typically tacit and "not easily visible and expressible" (ibid, p42). Explicit knowledge on the other hand, as often valued by the West, can be more unambiguously and objectively shared in the form of data, words and numbers (ibid, p42).

Ba has been identified by Nonaka et al (2006) within the context of promoting organisational success as an emergent foundation for workplace relationships and knowledge creation - a

fertile space where individual and/or collective knowledge is enhanced by newly emerging perspectives. It is a rich space that acknowledges the self in everything, where the individual realises himself as part of the environment in which his life depends - a concept and a context which harbours and grows meaning and potential, differentiated from ordinary human interaction because of the concept of knowledge creation. Nonaka et al propose that knowledge separated from Ba is just tangible information, but in contrast, intangible *knowledge* resides in Ba (ibid, p41), an organic ground and phenomenal place where tacit knowledge is embedded and where optimal conditions cultivate knowledge creation in individuals or group environments. Ba is a space of cultivating, recycling and reordering of knowledge resources (ibid, p53) to enable the re-formation and emergence of new knowing.

Resting in the workplaces of industry as it does, Nonaka's model of Ba provides a clear example of how inclusion of honouring spaces within our industry-driven vocational education and training sector might promote learning and knowledge about self that can be cultivated in a way that contributes to the success of the whole. Originating Ba, identified as the most critical of four key stages in Ba (Nonaka & Konno, 1998) is the foundation from which the knowledge creation process arises. The model contains far more complexities than can be used for the purposes of this analysis, but it is Nonaka and Konno's recognition of Originating Ba as the cultivating, foundational space for personal knowledge creation that I apply within the context of this study.

The stories that emerged – participants and their interviews

Extracts from the stories of my participants are included here that describe perspectives on their lived experience as they relate to the stages of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, and to Nonaka's theory of Ba. Alongside my five participants, I was and continue to be deeply situated as a learner. My own story forms the foundation of my inquiry - it has initiated, informed and continues to direct my process and was brought to the table of the interviews with my storytellers. Narrative is discussed by many in various guises, (Alheit, 1995; Denzin, 1989; Dominice, 2000; Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Riessman, 1993), but according to Brady (1990), it is about going back to the beginning and examining the course of life. He speaks about autobiography as originating in 'bios' – the course of life – and proposes that in reflecting on the learning of our life we have three aspects of self on which to focus. Firstly the *remembered self* recalls the scraps that link together to form the story - the drawing of a self-portrait with words, memories, storytelling and the interrelationship between past events and the memories of these events. He calls it a second reading of the human experience. The *ordered self* provides an aerial view of one's life - a way of making sense, of making meaning that enables the construction of a foundation on which a new future, a new story can be built. Finally the *imagined self* acknowledges the cosmology that occurs through recalling one's story and invites dreaming, opening to possibilities, and the creation of stories yet to be told. Brady suggests that in life our impulse is to create, and that through the autobiographical act one creates the self, becoming the hero of one's own mythic tale.

My first interviewee was Kate, a deeply reflective woman, fifty years of age, who spoke of life experiences that had afforded challenging but rich opportunities for her growth. Having established that Kate chose speaking her story as her mode of expression, I began by asking her what she had come to know about herself through the influences of her early years. "It was unlimited. There are no boundaries in learning and you never stop learning. It didn't matter what age you were, you learned if you wanted to." Having given herself permission to remember, Kate was transported back to the memories of her earliest years and to the messages imprinted in her being about life and living, drawing their wisdom back again to

her present perspective, connecting her past and present as she spoke. Brady (1990) refers to this – that through remembering, human life is given shape that extends back into the past and forward into the future. “(My father) ... would take us at night to the middle of the highway ... he would show us the stars ... it drew me to nature. My mother ... viewed people as people ... we weren’t brought up with ‘races’, we were brought up with people.” Kate had referred earlier to the identification of her values - integrity, honesty, calling things truthfully. “You cannot fall through trap doors ... you can just walk on solid ground. Everyone knows where you stand ... everyone knows where they stand with you”.

Annie, my second interviewee, a bright young woman full of energy and joie de vivre, spoke of being nurtured in a predominantly female environment in the absence of her father through most of her nineteen years. She explained she was in the process of responding to an identified restlessness in life, and expressed keen interest in being involved in the study as an opportunity to address this emerging recognition of the need for change. Before the interviews were arranged in the first session, Annie commented that she knew exactly how she wanted to undertake this reflection about her life and learning. “I drew a picture ... I did all the questions you had on the Tool 3 sheet and I tried to answer them ... so all my answers are the ‘rays’”. Annie showed me a beautiful picture of her lying down on the grass with the sun behind her and rays emerging around her body as comments. “I did it that way as I see things better when I’m drawing ... things are better when they are visual ... writing an essay isn’t for me ... I don’t really think you understand your thoughts until you’ve got them in front of you ... I think that is one of the benefits of an experience like this, you realise things about yourself when you say them and tell it to somebody else, because when it’s just in your head it’s fairly immaterial”. I asked her to talk me through her reflections. “... one of the questions (was) about what you were constricted by. I was really constricted by my surroundings, by the people around me, because I have all these expectations and pressures and it makes it really hard to decide what ‘I’ want to do. It’s all about what everyone else wants me to do, not about what I want to do ... it gets to the point where I go “Just leave me alone, I want to be on my own, I don’t want to tell you what I’m doing.” But it’s good, better to be smothered than not noticed at all.”

My third interviewee Sara expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity to reflect more deeply on her motivation and direction in life. She saw participation in the study as a potentially rich learning opportunity to complement her developing skills and knowledge. As with all my participants, I began with a question about how she chose to reflect on and record her life story. “My objective all the time is to find different ways of expressing myself. I have always been a very shy, quiet person, quite defensive in a sense ... very scared of letting the world in. That’s why I love my acting... it allows me the freedom that I don’t have naturally ... art as a sense of autobiography ... creative arts like painting, all different forms of art ... keeping a journal. I think it is ... a form of letting go of me ... I found out through finding out what I’m not ... I’ve found out more of what I am.” I asked Sara about the experience of exploring her story, and she commented that it was an emerging, evolving sense of who she was. “I think also exploring the story in different ways as well ... it’s like you said, how do you want to do it, write it down or draw it, it’s up to you, so I tried a bit of each ... you might get nothing except something in the drawing, like a little right at the end.”

Penn, 19 years of age and my ‘poet laureate’¹ chose to meet me at the institute where we found a small breakout room. We started by discussing his chosen method of recording his

¹ In the first class-based session, where I introduced the concept of reflective storytelling, Penn created a poem to reflect his thoughts on his life and learning experiences.

reflections, and I asked him to tell me about his process. “I started thinking about the earliest memories I had, and how much things had changed physically around our house. I actually hadn’t thought about it for many years, then I started to think ... I remember when there was a clothes line there and remember when those trees weren’t there, and this wasn’t there, and it was quite interesting realising how much had changed ... questions you don’t often think of until something sparks it, then you start like a rolling chain.” Penn’s comment reflects Annie’s experience – that through finding an honouring space where you can begin to reflect on life, it almost takes on a life of its own. “I noticed that I am a very self-motivated person when it comes to learning, but only when it interests me. ... I never really follow up something if it’s thrown at me. When I’m forced to do something I really fight against it - I don’t like being forced to go down a specific path. Quite often I’ll be thinking “This bores me so much!”, but then if it’s something that sparks my interests I’ll pursue it.” Penn has identified an unconscious rejection of others’ impositions, unknowingly working to claim authority over the act of his life as it has unfolded. Nelson (1994) refers to this strongly identified and enacted authorship of one’s life course that emerges through the autobiographical process. Penn told of being a product of a deeply loving and nurturing extended family. “One thing that I quite appreciate is that my family as a whole have always encouraged me to do anything that I wanted. “Anything is possible, it just depends on what you personally want to do. How do you know you aren’t good at it, if you haven’t given it that try?” I quite like having had that freedom to know ... to have had an upbringing where you are told that anything is possible, because I think you are less likely to be afraid of going after what you want. I feel like I can pick something and throw myself at it and if it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. But I don’t feel obligated to do something. When you have to do something you dislike, it’s like walking uphill and if it’s something you enjoy it’s like strolling along and you don’t even notice that it’s an effort.” Interestingly, both Penn and Sara have commented on the ease of doing something that is honouring and authentic to the self – that in connecting with one’s truth, life can be more fluid.

Zac, an intriguing young man, whose intelligent and inquiring mind has fostered a keen interest and grounded knowledge in the practical and scientific world around him, was my final interview and like Kate, he chose to use his words for our interview, preferring to speak his story rather than writing or drawing. He expressed interest in participating as a possible means of clarifying how he might move forward personally and professionally, and was able to identify learning from various influences of his life. “My mother always told me that anything was possible ... my father ... basically told me to become successful and earn lots of money ... my teachers basically told me to give up ... I finished the work that was set ... and had nothing to do so I became rowdy and eventually teachers stopped giving me work altogether and just gave up ... wrote me off ... constantly wanted to learn and always told to stop ... they sort of gave up because they were like “We can’t go at your pace and leave everyone else behind.” So you just have to sit here and do the same thing constantly ... it got to the point where I reduced myself to less than normal pace and fell behind.” Zac identified teachers in his later years at school that tried to nurture his intelligence and eagerness to learn, but commented that it was left too late.

In the honouring space that Ba provides, Zac was able to identify deeply discouraging learning experiences where he has been unable to find meaning and relevance, and where the educational system has seemingly failed to respond to his particular forms of intelligence (Gardner, 1983). Penn, although successful himself, spoke of empathising with peers undergoing demoralising experiences “I was never too bad with tests but I had a couple of friends who were terrible ... they did know all of the stuff, but they would get so stressed out.

I remember raging and saying “Why do we do this when obviously it’s not a matter of intelligence ... this isn’t working for these people!”

Through participating in spaces that fostered deep reflection on the experiences of their life to this point, Kate, Annie, Sara, Penn and Zac were able to identify circumstances and environments that have contributed to their sense of self-identity and of self-knowing, and to articulate an emerging understanding around the impact of these experiences. Mezirow (2000) identifies the significance of critical reflection in the transformative learning process as individuals begin to critique the power relationships and hegemonic assumptions that exist within their immediate and larger environments, coming to identify the political and social dimensions that have influenced their meaning-making. Brookfield (2005) suggests that transformative learning occurs when what was once was seen to be permanent and stable is recognised by the individual as being relative and situation specific, and often shaped to accommodate the needs and interests of ruling others. When awareness arises about the relevance and validity of ruling epistemological frameworks, we have the choice of staying in our familiarity, or of stepping out to find personally authentic meaning amongst previously irrefutable ‘truths’. Shor and Freire (1987) advocate the cultivation of a critically conscious lens across the life span, and join others in challenging a limiting approach that often begins in early learning and discourages a critical persona in life (Bourdieu, 1977; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 1998; Piaget & Nicholson-Smith, 1979). They propose that transformation requires the critically reflective process to be politicised in order to identify the impact of ruling structures on individual agency.

In the account of his passage undertaken as a priest critically examining his life, Nelson (1994) proposes that through reviewing and interpreting one’s life story, accounts of transformative and emancipatory learning emerge and one has the capacity to construct a new reality that can fortify a strongly identified and enacted authorship of one’s life course. He suggests that a transformed perspective can develop through the imaginative and critical process of what became known to him as ‘autobiographing’. In imagining, he proposes, the individual’s conscious and unconscious domains of knowing are connected, and the ongoing critical analysis and synthesis of this inner and outer experience and knowing has the capacity to reshape previously inculcated behaviours and attitudes. Nelson speaks of coming to imagine a future previously unknown through undertaking the transformative process of storytelling.

How story and the spaces of Ba foster perspective transformation

At the final focus group and through phone conversations with the two participants unable to attend, we reflected on the ways in which the autobiographical process had fostered the unfolding of stories and understanding, and influenced the perspectives and learning of each participant. The opportunity was also provided to reflect on changes of attitude or behaviour, in response to any recognised perspective transformation achieved through the process.

Annie spoke of wanting more answers, less questions, more action as she moves forward. “The fundamentals haven’t changed but I think they will be different people in my life ... different for the better, hard to articulate ... not just being along for the ride in my life ... I don’t want everyone making my choices for me. I have become much more specific as a learner ... opened myself up a lot more to more opportunities. I think that’s really helpful as I might not have done it otherwise.”

Sara described “After I spoke with you ... it was building on what I spoke about ... I want to be able to earn a living from what I love so I can go home and do things like be with my family. If

my vision on the future has changed in that little way, I think I'm ready to commit more because I know how much I want to do it. ... I think it's ... growing more aware ... don't let your mind drift or anything because it's the detail in what you learn, not the broad idea ... it's paying attention ... being more present ... when something bigger comes along that you've been waiting for."

Penn commented " I suppose I tend to think of everything in terms of looking back, because I used to be quite a shy person ... still am in a lot of ways. But at a certain stage ... I realised that not doing things is not worth it. I want to be able to talk about it later and when you've got something in front of you, you want to be able to say you did the awesome thing, the brave thing, like you walked across the coals. It might hurt like hell, but later you can go, "I walked right across a bed of coals and it was brilliant ... See these scars?" That's how I think about things that I do, I want to look back on it and think "God, you were awesome!"

After the Focus Group, I rang Zac to seek his final thoughts on the reflective process. He spoke of his plans to enrol in a university course that would lead him into what he named broadly as politics. Zac is taking it all under consideration

In my final discussion with Kate, I inquired if she had any further reflections on the process. She recognized that undertaking the storytelling had stirred her thinking, and had been surprised by how powerfully looking back at the past had impacted on her. She commented that she now has insight into why she responds to certain situations in the way that she does. Looking through different eyes, Kate has expressed an understanding that it relates to unresolved issues, identifying her inability to move forward most effectively until such time as she is able to confront and deal with the issues. She commented that it has been beneficial for her to have clarified this understanding and was grateful for the opportunity to gain insight into why she behaves and responds the way that she does.

Through providing a space of Ba where individuals were able to reflect on stories of learning, long-held assumptions were unpacked, examined and critiqued to enable construction of new, more authentic knowledge of self, and as they reflected deeply on the learning of their lives, new perspectives, knowledge and stories of possibility emerged for them. For me, the notion of "topology" suggested by Malpas (2006) is most helpful in coming to grips with understanding this space of Ba. "... topology is an attempt to illuminate a place in which we already find ourselves and in which other things are disclosed to us (ibid p34)." He identifies that "... central questions of philosophy, questions of being and existence ... must take their determination and their starting point from this place" (ibid p39), and it is here that I see Nonaka's notion of Ba and the landscapes of topology intersecting with the spaces of Mezirow's perspective transformation. In this space of Originating Ba, the autobiographical interrogation and re-examination of mental schemas and assumptions about one's learning in life can be exposed, enhanced and overturned as necessary to create more authentic knowledge of self as learner. If Ba is indeed a shared space for emerging relationships, then plausibly, the relationship to the self can also benefit from these spaces of Ba. Nonaka uses metaphors of Nishida's 'I love therefore I am'(ibid p46), in contrast to Descartes 'I think therefore I am' to describe Originating Ba as the place where love, trust and commitment emerge' - a powerful concept of honouring relationships to self and other within the realms of high-powered business and industry.

In analysing these narratives of adult learning, I found first that as my participants progressed through the process of recalling the scraps that linked together to form the story of their lives (Brady, 1990), and shared the joys and turbulence of the path to their knowing and becoming,

the honouring space of Ba fostered a rich dynamic that enabled the continued exploration of ideas. As each participant offered their unique motivation and approach to the task at hand, a weaving of a tapestry of life stories that truly honoured the narrative tradition was created. Through observing this uniquely individual approach, each story of learning took different paths, and found its own representation in Mezirow's stages of Transformative Learning, exploring the experiences, influences and environments of the landscapes of their lives.

Second, I found that much like a topological study of a landscape, and the exquisite complexity of the intersection of its component parts, the spaces of Ba provided my participants an anchoring place from which they could begin to gain understanding about their learning in life and their interaction with the world around them. Nonaka identifies originating Ba as the foundation on which the knowledge creation process arises (1998), and as each participant reflected on their own life passage within this space, they brought forth stories of learning, identifying and disposing of obsolete ways in order to imagine new ways of seeing and engaging with the world around them.

Finally, Mezirow (2000), Brookfield (2005), Nelson (Nelson, 1994), Brady (1990), Freire and Shor (1986) urge us to draw on the political and social dimensions of meaning-making, identifying the power of critical reflection in the transformative learning process through the recognition of power relationships and hegemonic assumptions that exist within our immediate and larger environment. Nonaka tells us that in order to find new and authentic knowledge, the spaces of learning will ideally resemble the originating spaces of Ba ... shared spaces for optimising emerging relationships to the self and to the environment in which life depends (1998). Throughout the study, the research participants were encouraged to apply this critical focus in examining their expressed knowing, to identify assumptions that found their knowing. Brady's *remembered self* (1990) was brought to the fore through the process of storytelling, drawing together disparate and seemingly unconnected aspects of past experience, and as stories wove together, meshing historical fact and truth of imagination, each participant had the opportunity to create meaning that has to various extents enabled a more *ordered self* to be formulated – the foundations on which a new story can be built. Now the *imagined self* can begin to take root, as new possibilities, new dreaming is seeded and nurtured (Brady, 1990). Each of them has articulated an awakening sense of possibility of how they might now step forward on their learning and career pathways, and have expressed a sense of freedom in choosing to claim and enact a more personally authentic and self-authored life.

Conclusions and recommendations

For many, returning to study in the classrooms of VET gives rise to memories of the classrooms of their youth where learner identities were formed. In too many cases, these spaces of learning failed to respond to their needs and led to the construction of invalid frames of reference. Like the many I have spoken to along my own path, my participants acknowledged the transforming journey of self-discovery undertaken through the course of this self-narrative, and articulated insights that mirror those in the literature reviewed. The stories told and shared by them in the safe spaces of Ba identify and articulate the place of self-recognition individuals arrive at, and illustrate how examining the landscape of our lives can enable a change in perspective through identification and acknowledgement of previously unrecognised and unchallenged life views. Telling our stories seems to provide the space for the allocation of meaning to behaviours and attitudes that may have been carried with us for decades, but which might now be seen as unproductive, often destructive and dispensable. My participants articulated knowing that once identified and acknowledged, these limiting

beliefs and behaviours are able to be released, making sense and reconciling aspects of the past that have bound them to a sometimes narrow window of existence, giving them as storyteller a new perspective on the possibilities inherent within their journey of adult learning. Through understanding more fully their capacity as lifelong learners on a new path of identity formation, they spoke of being able to step with greater personal authority into a future of previously unimagined possibility.

The work-dominated discourse of VET suggests that learning involves the acquisition of a set of skills or competencies that are external to the learner, and which the learner lacks, reflecting Freire's notion of a deficit/banking approach which aims to overcome learners' 'deficiencies' by 'topping up' their existing skills or 'adding value' to their productive capacity by way of depositing extra skills, ultimately rendering the learner 'employable' (Freire, 1972). This approach assumes the locus of learning and curriculum lies outside the learner rather than within the learners themselves. I would argue that the findings of my research explicitly problematise, if not overturn, such assumption and narrow conceptions about the purpose and outcomes of VET, identifying that the nature of learning is far more complex, multifaceted and potentially empowering in non-vocational ways than is conventionally presumed (Anderson, 1999). It suggests that the most potentially valuable and transformative learning that occurs within the context of VET may well be that which emerges from a 'curriculum' that is generated from within learners themselves, wherein they are working on and from their selves, restor(y)ing their lives, which may also include the development of new technical skills or workplace competencies, but which cannot be simply reduced to the latter. Indeed, it could be argued that the development of new technical skills or workplace competencies may not translate as effectively into employment unless the learner has at the same time, as an integral part of the whole learning process, also rewritten, relearned and reoriented their life stories in ways that incorporate and embody the new skills and competencies in a newly constructed sense of self. I argue that for the learner returning to study within the context of VET, enormous potential exists for change at an individual level through utilising the storytelling methodology. In applying Nonaka's notion of originating Ba, a concept and a context which harbours and grows meaning and potential, acknowledging the self in everything, we can support the perspective transformation of these individuals as they draw forth their own knowing.

The transformative journey can be an arduous, and often drawn out affair, where new epistemological frameworks take time to percolate and gain clarity (Taylor, 2007). Taylor speaks of '... developing a sense of trust in the process of transformative learning, allowing for students to live with some discomfort while on the edge of knowing, in the process of gaining new insights and understandings.' The brief opportunities provided to lay open the depths of their memories through this telling of their stories is limited in its capacity to foster a sustainable transformed perspective for these learners, but it is a springboard to another level of understanding. It is coming, perhaps for the first time, to their most authentic truth – the unfolding of the story yet to be told. My storytellers are dancing on the edge of their knowing (Berger, 2004), along the continuum of the ever-morphing path of becoming.

My research was a small-scale study conducted in one TAFE institute involving a relatively small, self-selected sample of participants and limited data gathering activities. Due to the limitations of the study, there is much that remains unanswered and a broader, large-scale research study is required to interrogate what has yet to be uncovered around the transformative benefits of providing the reflective and honouring spaces of Ba. My work as an educator focuses on learning and learner identity as the primary foundation for achievement of any personally meaningful, resonant goal, and my current PhD research explores how we can create

the conditions for this success, proposing it begins with the educator and their own transformative story of learning. It is my hope to broaden understanding of the implications of these limited findings as they relate to the potentially greater vocational and social benefits of individual perspective transformation within the context of vocational education and training.

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