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Michael Hammond

How ideas of transformative learning can inform academic blogging

Abstract: This paper looks at blogging by academics and argues that there is a niche role for an academic blog informed by principles of transformative learning. I begin by describing my experiences of blogging, first, as a reader while carrying out my own doctoral research, next, as a teacher introducing blogs to my students, then as a writer of my own journal blog. I suggest that transformative learning principles provide a frame of reference for understanding these experiences, in particular, by offering an idea of autonomy which puts subjective experience in social contexts. I then suggest that academics interested in transformative learning might learn a more engaging style of writing from bloggers.

1 Introduction

Blogs (or 'web logs') are online spaces with entries in reverse chronological order, and with an option for readers to post comments. Blogs take their place within a family of social media including social networks, such as Facebook, photo sharing, such as Instagram, and micro messaging such as Twitter – all of which could be described as variations on blogging. Blogs can be used in many different ways, but my interest is in a certain type of blogging practice which falls under the general idea of online journaling. I argue that transformative learning

principles can help us to understand and develop journaling as a practice. The paper is organised around four sections titled: My experiences with blogs; Transformative learning as a frame of reference; Blogging through the lens of transformative learning; and What transformative learning can learn from blogging?

2 My experiences with blogs

My first encounter with academic blogs (or at least blogs written by academics) was at the turn of this century when a colleague directed me to a 'Scandinavian-flavoured cluster' of linked blogs by mostly female bloggers, with an interest in information, media and technology (see Mortensen and Walker, 2002). These were online journals (the verb journaling was introduced around this time, Herring, 2004) which reflected on the process of doing academic research and being a researcher. As starting a doctorate myself I found these blogs provided me with a window on everyday research activity as well as insight into how the Internet was being used for new forms of literacy. The blogs left me optimistic about our newly emerging connected world and I was intrigued to know what the bloggers themselves got out of it. Writing about their experiences two early bloggers found blogging was research activity in its own right:

> A weblogger filters a mass of information, choosing the items that interest her or that are relevant to her chosen topic, commenting upon them, demonstrating connections between them and analysing them. (Mortensen and Walker, 2002, p. 250)

In other words blogs were more than a means of communication, they were also a tool for thinking and for charting changes in thinking. As such, blogs offered a space for a new genre of writing which 'straddled writing towards others and writing for oneself' (Mortensen and Walker, 2002, p. 250). This seemed a key phrase for if blogs were written only for oneself then a private diary would be more appropriate; if only for readers, then bloggers might lose the opportunity to address themselves. It was the attempt

*Corresponding author: Michael Hammond, Centre for Education Studies, Room B1.39, Social Science Building, University of Warwick, UK, Email: M.Hammond@warwick.ac.uk

to understand personal experience in a wider context that worked for me as a reader.

Inspired by this first encounter, and aware of a significant support for student blogs in my institution, I was able to later carry a short term collaboration with research students which involved discussing doctorate work in individual blog journals and taking part in more organised discussion in a joint blog. Topics included academic writing, expectations for a doctorate, and our own research (Hammond, 2006). It turned out that rates of participation were uneven and most students were only able to post a few entries. However nearly everyone had taken part in the joint blog and two had produced some quite detailed and reflective entries in their personal journals. All appreciated the experiment, they could point to times when blogging had encouraged them to reflect on their ideas and they could see the potential of communicating to a wider and removed audience. Discussing the 'characteristic traits' of a blog, student bloggers felt that entries should be short and 'conversational' given that there was limited time to read them, they should be personal but not unduly provocative or breach confidence. The most frequently cited constraint on participation was the lack of purpose (the emptiness of blank screen) and lack of time (though, as ever, this does not mean that those who blogged had more time).

After these first experiences I paid less attention to blogging. However I would routinely set up joint blogs for the courses I taught and learnt to value the contributions of those who took part and not to worry about those who did not. Looking back I had a tendency to underplay what some of these contributions had achieved. I wanted to see posts that could be unambiguously labelled as reflective and indeed reflexive when that was unrealistic. For example, one blog I recall came from a student on our teacher-training programme who had given birth shortly after the close of the programme. She shared pictures of her new baby and said a little about her plans for part time teaching in the following year. The blog was conversational and fairly short but it touched on identity and spoke of friendship and openness with her peers. I think I wanted her to tell us something sociological about multiple identities; but she was not telling us about her different roles, she was showing us and I had not seen it.

I contributed regularly to joint blogs over time but only recently did I decide to create my own journal blog. I managed eighteen posts over a period from November 2014 to July 2016. Each entry was around 1,000 words - shorter and more conversational than a paper but longer and in fact more formal than many of the blogs I have seen. The blog was infrequent but not orphaned and indeed is

on-going. I intended to follow my personal research interests and found this particularly helpful when I wanted to work out my stance on an issue. For example I wrote about the value of online campaigns such as #BringBackOurGirls (this in response to the abduction of 276 Nigerian schoolgirls in April 2014) or online responses to the 'disappearance' (or to be precise murder) of student teachers from a training college in Ayotzinapa in Mexico (September, 2014). For some this kind of online activity was 'Slaktivist': it involved little effort and made no difference. I found myself more supportive of so-called Slaktivism than I had initially intended and writing the blog helped me to shift my position and clarify my thoughts.

In the blog I wanted to avoid raising vexations of academic life not so much on grounds of confidentiality but I felt if I was not happy with someone or something I should try to put it right with the people concerned rather than tell others about it. I wanted instead to reflect on articles I had read, public discussion of education and technology and conferences I had attended. This provided an eclectic mix of topics including political activism, the rise of Big Data and book reviews. One thing that intrigued me about technology was that, once seen by counter cultural commentators as oppressive, it had been taken up as a support for collaboration and creativity. When and why had this happened? This meant looking back and commenting in the blog on texts that had informed the cultural climate of the past – including so called 'break out' books such as Pirsig's (1974) *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and Marcuse's (2013 [1964]) *One-Dimensional Man*. Most of the time I tried to dwell on work I had liked and enjoyed reading, though this was not always the case. For example, I was disappointed in Marcuse and I was despondent about public debate of education – on one blog I wrote about the reporting of a piece of educational research and I found the same misleading comments recycled across different publications.

There were clearly other topics on which I could have expressed an opinion, for example during this period of blogging we had a General Election and European referendum in the UK. Clearly I had opinions (and expressed these elsewhere) but I felt I did not have anything to say that drew on my academic reading, and I wanted to tie the blog to this.

The blog site itself attracted 20 visitors in 2014; 388 in 2015; and 414 up to June 2016 though the number of readers for any post was far fewer. To put this in perspective a group blog such as *Social Theory Applied* (Murphy et al. 2013 - 2016), which provides reflective pieces on social theory from a team of editors and guest contributors, has a very high numbers of visitors and is developing an open

access journal. A personal blog is difficult to maintain and is unlikely to be a 'must see' unless the reader is drawn in by the author's reputation, and / or sustained focus on a particular issue – as is the case with, for example, Pat Thomson's much viewed site on doing research (Thomson, Undated).

The number of readers did not worry me at all. First, I wanted to find my feet with blogging and decide for myself if this was something I could realistically commit to and, second, anyone who has written for academic publication is well used to having a small readership. In any case what I had enjoyed in earlier blogs was the attempt to straddle the public / private worlds: for this you needed an audience of some kind, but not to become dominated by that audience. In reflecting on her first experiences of blogging one prolific blogger, Jill Walker mentions that 'I preferred blogging when most people did not know about it' (Walker 2006) – this seemed an important insight.

My experience as a reader and writer of blogs has left me with a sense of how a personal concern could be presented for a public audience. However I became increasingly aware that blogs were being used for more promotional purposes in academia and that the close tie between journaling and blogging was being lost. It was also becoming commonplace to deride social media in general as trivial and self-absorbed. Of course blogs can take on many forms and purposes, but I wanted to promote the kind of online journaling that I had enjoyed in the past and introduce a frame of reference that would show its value. I turned to transformative learning.

3 Transformative learning as a frame of reference

Other frames of reference are of course possible but transformative learning interested me as it has traditionally been concerned with subjectivity and intersubjectivity, in ways that drew parallels to some aspects of academic journaling. Moreover Freire, a key figure in transformative learning, had a life long interest in literacy which offered to throw light on the potential of transformative practice using social media. Transformative (along with paradigm shifting) is of course used widely in discussing the introduction of ICT (see policy documents such as DfES, 2005; US Department of Education, 2010, but academic reporting also, say, Harasim, 2000, or, in the context of blogs, Williams & Jacobs, 2004) but this had left me unconvinced. I wanted to take as my reference point the earlier literature

on transformative learning even if its relationship to social media needed to be worked at.

Transformative learning has long appeared in action research literature (see, for example, Elliott, 1991 and a raft of case studies such as Gravett, 2004; Price, 2001) and in community, workplace learning and adult learning where Mezirow and Freire are key figures (e.g. Freire, 1970a; 1970b, Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow and Taylor, 2011). Mezirow and Freire interested me as they tied transformative learning to an ethical goal - the development of autonomous thinking. In other words certain changes are valuable as they give learners greater understanding and control of their lives. Mezirow, for example, sees learning as transformative when we question what is taken for granted (for example ethnic or race discrimination) and become able to make our own interpretations rather than rely on those of others:

> When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience. (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5)

Like many others (see Bamber and Crowther, 2012 in the field of community education), Mezirow finds Habermas an important point of reference. For him, Habermas's idea of communicative learning appears transformative as it is built on rational consensus in which frameworks for judgments are critiqued. This can be contrasted to instrumental learning aimed at advancing one's self interest. As Mezirow (1997, p.6) puts it:

> In instrumental learning, the truth of an assertion may be established through empirical testing. But communicative learning involves understanding purposes, values, beliefs, and feelings and is less amenable to empirical tests. In communicative learning, it becomes essential for learners to become critically reflective of the assumptions underlying intentions, values, beliefs, and feelings.

A second key figure in transformative learning is Freire. Freire's key work concerned literacy and like many others he, unsurprisingly, saw illiteracy as a barrier to participation in society. What particularly appealed to me is that literacy could not be defined by the technical capacity to decode texts; rather for Freire to be literate involved a growing awareness of one's capacity to transform social reality. For those at the margins of society this involved understanding the structures that oppressed, and engaging with dialectical action - reflection on the world, action on the world and reflection on action - in order to overcome these structures. The literacy movement could not

be divorced from a commitment to develop conscientization, a word used unevenly but summarised by Freire's editor as:

> the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality. (Freire, 1970b, p. 221 - 222)

Mezirow and Freire are often linked together within a transformative learning tradition: both offer action-oriented approaches to learning and both write in support of autonomy. However there is a clear tension between Mezirow's focus on personal autonomy, and Freire's commitment to collective action to address structural asymmetries of power. Mezirow, like Dewey earlier, belongs to a radical liberal tradition (for more on this see Dirkx, 1998 on Freire and Mezirow and Ryan, 1995 on Dewey); in contrast, Freire comes with an analysis of inequality and an agenda for social change.

I do not sign up for all that Mezirow and Freire have to say. Mezirow can be criticised for paying too little attention to the structures that cause asymmetry of power -'transformative learning' goals can and did too easily morph into programmes of personal assertiveness and empowerment taken up by people whose education and social positions made them quite powerful in the first place. Meanwhile, Freire's commitment to one particular agenda for change (along with his willingness to talk of true and false beliefs about the world) left me, as it did many other sympathetic commentators, deeply uneasy.

Both Mezirow and Freire can further seem romantic about transformative learning. The very term transformative appears to imply life-changing events, but in practice attempts to promote transformative practice may result in modest and heavily constrained outcomes, but these can and should nonetheless be celebrated. One cause of romanticisation may lie in the tight distinction between transformative and instrumental learning. The distinction is clearly important yet both Mezirow and Freire weave in instrumental arguments into their narratives. For example Mezirow backs up his case for transformative learning with an almost throwaway comment that modern economic systems require us to be critical and flexible (Mezirow, 1997: 8). Freire, meanwhile, in discussing the consequences of literacy, cites a peasant (Freire's term) who had taken part in a literacy programme as saying:

> When I started I couldn't read, but I soon realized that I needed to read and write. You can't imagine what it was like to go to Santiago to buy parts. I couldn't get orientated. I was afraid of everything afraid of the big city, of buying the wrong thing, of being cheated. Now it's all different. (Freire, 1970a, p. 220)

In the same text this peasant describes how literacy changed his relationship to the latifundio (or estate) but there is an instrumental dimension, the negotiation of the market, that cannot be divorced from a wider political agenda. My biggest concern however with Freire is the extent to which he sees the exercise of autonomy as predictable, when in practice it is not. For example, in discussing the impact of advertising he notes:

> as men through discussion begin to perceive the deceit in a cigarette advertisement featuring a beautiful, smiling woman in a bikini (ie, the fact that she, her smile, her beauty, and her bikini have nothing at all to do with the cigarette), they begin to discover the difference between education and propaganda. At the same time, they are preparing themselves to discuss and perceive the same deceit in ideological or political propaganda; they are arming themselves to 'dissociate ideas'. In fact, this has always seemed to me to be the way to defend democracy, not a way to subvert it. (Freire, 1983, p. 291 - 292).

I have read and reread this paragraph but I do not understand what Freire thinks is the deceit here. In fact the advertisement may be critiqued as an example of everyday sexism; it might be offensive on public health grounds; or indeed it might be seen as simple economic manipulation (smoking is fine, sexist representations are tolerable but men, and it is men in this example, are being misled into buying more expensive brands). In practice how we read a text will differ depending on our stance and this stance will shift as the social cultural backdrop changes. One consequence is that if we are trying to help others see advertising as 'propaganda' we need, further, to recognise that learners are free to ignore our critique (they may see the manipulation but not be over-exercised about it) and / or that they may have long ago reached the conclusion for themselves that advertising is manipulation. In short, Freire offers an innovative, socially responsible pedagogy but he can also come over as didactic and illiberal (he is the one who knows what liberation looks like).

4 Blogging through the lens of transformative learning

I have so far considered journaling and gone on to discuss some tenets of transformative learning. I now want to image a blogging practice informed by transformative learning in the hope that this will make explicit practices which are emergent in the blogging which some academ-

ics do and will offer leads for those developing blogs in the future. In particular there are five principles derived from transformative learning which I think can help us think about blogging:

4.1 Blogging should have both a private and public focus

We saw that a unifying idea in transformative learning is a commitment to a particular kind of autonomy based on an understanding of what constrains rational action and leads towards a frame of reference that is, in Mezirow's words, 'inclusive, discriminating, and self-reflective'. This view of autonomy is valuable as it involves mutual recognition rather than narrow egoism and self-absorption. It implies an attempt to understand how our own thoughts and actions are shaped by others and how they will be seen by others. In respect to blogging and other social media, it implies, to borrow from Mortensen and Walker's (2002) phrase earlier, 'writing towards others and writing for oneself'. This is a search for intersubjectivity which contrasts with social networks that focus more on personal subjectivity ('where I have been'; 'who I saw'; 'what I ate' and so on) and the kind of narcissism that we can often see in, say, in Facebook pages (see Papacharissi, 2010). I am not condemning. Subjectivity can be fun and can lead to social participation at many different levels, but it does offer a reduced idea of autonomy. From a transformative learning perspective, reflecting on personal events provides an opportunity for exploration of the frames of reference we use to make judgements and an opportunity to understand our motives and behaviour. The search for online intersubjectivity can contribute more broadly to a public sphere as once imagined by Blood (2002) and others.

4.2 It should have an action orientation

Transformative learning starts out from the premise that learning is triggered by practical problems. These problems are first addressed in the imagination and then in practice; solutions are evaluated and changes integrated or adapted. Blogs seem an ideal place to describe and discuss problems of practice but they are compromised without an action orientation. For example, in the Guardian newspaper (Anonymous, 2015 - 2106) there is a 'blog'

on the 'trials, tribulations and frustrations' of university work. The contributions are well written insights into academia but they are uniformly pessimistic, as indeed the brief steers them to be. The net result is, at least for me, an invitation to see these 'trials' as inevitable, and perhaps for those outside of academia to see them as reflecting personal failings and anxieties rather than consequences of structural difficulties. They lack the action orientation of transformative learning and the optimism that goes along with this. Bloggers cannot change the world through blogging but they can suggest alternatives and they provide space for counter cultural arguments. As an example, an anonymous blogger (Anon, 2010 - 2016) describes the frustrations of being a train driver on the London underground but reminds us at the same time how work was or could be organised differently. It is difficult to find blogs in academia routinely doing the same thing and transformative learning suggests they should.

4.3 It should go beyond instrumental concerns

Transformative learning draws a distinction between instrumental goals and communicative learning. A communicative approach requires the writer to seek a shared understanding and to explore reflexivity. As seen earlier some reflective journaling does this. In practice, however, the promotion of blogs is often geared towards the instrumental. Within the impact agenda for higher education academics are asked to think about using blogs to get their message out. They should consider their 'core audience' and should develop an 'editorial mission in order to create consistent media content' (Anselmo, 2015). Blogs may be seen as alternatives to journal publication (Laine, 2015; Woodfield, 2014). Academics are further encouraged to use their own blogs for archiving, promotion of ideas and enhancing their professional reputation. For example in the field of transformative learning, Wals (2011) offers a collection of informative articles as well as an update on his own research activity and a Paolo Freire site (undated) has an archive of materials and news in the form of blogs posts. As seen earlier there is not a binary distinction between communicative and instrumental and both Wals and the Freire site offer something of value for other scholars. However reflective journaling does something different – it seeks to engage imaginatively with others and it is more tentative and exploratory.

4.4 It should describe what is taken for granted and question it

All approaches to transformative learning focus on every-day life rather than problems of theory. Freire makes a virtue of the day to day by offering a pedagogy for transformative learning based around 'decodification':

> In our method, the codification initially takes the form of a photograph or sketch that represents a real existent, or an existent constructed by the learners. When this representation is projected as a slide, the learners effect an operation basic to the act of knowing: they gain distance from the knowable object. This experience of distance is undergone as well by the educators, so that educators and learners together can reflect critically on the knowable object that mediates between them. The aim of decodification is to arrive at the critical level of knowing, beginning with the learner's experience of the situation in the "real context." (Freire, 1970a, p. 213)

Many bloggers at least begin the process of decodification. For example bloggers of cities tackle as subject matter the off beat, the unfashionable, and, echoing the goals of the Mass Observation project (undated) last century, a focus on the ordinary. For example a popular blog (Mole, 2003 - 2014) presented the everyday experience of travelling on the London Underground in quirky sets of images and accompanying text. It is decodification of a sort as it helps readers get a distance on their environment and to see the city in a new light. However it does not aim to enrol readers in a movement for change.

Academics can of course write about any area of interest but the most distinctive aspect of their work is that is that it revolves around intellectual exploration and participation in 'imaginary communities' of people and ideas. It is not easy or usual for academics to describe their thinking or decodify their practice. This is unfortunate as some have written informatively about their research experiences, including Anderson (2016), Eco (2015), Mills, (1959); feminist researchers such as Middleton (1992); action researchers such as Winter (1989); and reflexive methodologists such as Huisman (2008). Journal blogs can do the same thing but with greater immediacy and a focus on the quotidian as well as the extraordinary.

4.5 It should see literacy as a developing practice

Transformative learning sees any kind of learning as developmental, consisting, say, of spirals (Elliott, 1991, p.71) or steps (Mezirow, 1991) of action and reflection. This dialectical perspective is very helpful as it sets the blogger free from unrealistic expectations – he or she will not 'get it right' first time around but will develop a practice based around a process of doing; reflecting; adapting. From Freire we also learn that through literacy one's relationship to the world develops. It is unlikely that developing a blog, will have the same startling impact as being able to read and write for the first time and it is important not to romanticise. However, Freire reminds us that literacy is not about technique but a deepening awareness of what shapes our lives and work and what we can do about to change. In a small way this was something I understood through blogging.

5 What transformative learning can learn from bloggers

I have argued so far for a kind of academic journaling which draws on transformative learning principles by being reflexive, action oriented, critical and not driven by instrumental considerations. But I finish by arguing that academics interested in transformative learning have things to learn from bloggers. In particular they can learn to be more open about their values and experiences and the fallibility of their research. They can in the words of this journal put the 'I' into the centre of their work. Without such a focus, academic writing can quickly become 'reified' – we forget that it is the product of a human being and invest in it an objective quality (an 'itness') that is in Freire's term difficult to decodify. Academics are socialised into presenting texts which offer certainty and, ironically, writers promoting transformative learning can end up with the kind of didacticism and dogmatism identified earlier as a critical problem in my reading of Freire. Even within the action research community, which might be best placed to understand the fallibility of academic knowledge, a sense of critical distance can get lost. Models of action research are often discussed as though they are generalizable - that one model is correct and the other is not. Instead we need to see knowledge as fallible – there to be critiqued and / or reconfigured to adapt to local conditions – even while we recognise the value of scholarship and the need to address subjectivity. If we use blogs to let others into the research process we can show that academic work is not value free. As Sasley and Sucharov (2014) argue, all of us:

> identify with one or more communities—ethno-national, political, ideological, and so on. But because they are presumed

to compromise objectivity, we have been socialized to believe that these commitments need to be put aside when we engage in scholarly work.

By letting others into the process of research we can reduce the barriers, and the asymmetry, that builds up between students, and other users of research, and academics. Moreover academics will find through studying blogs that there are other, more compelling ways of writing – and there are good examples of this in the Scandinavian blogs cited earlier and contemporary blogs such as Brigley (undated), an academic who writes about her creative life (she is a poet, writer and teacher of creative writing) in the context of what sociologists might call the life world. Blogs can free up academics to report on the small picture rather than grand theory, they can be conversational, and they can show as well as tell. Through blogging academics can be personal and tentative, they can show doubt and humility. They can marry social criticism with reflection on memory and identity as, for example, Thomas (2016) does when describing an attack on a Polish social and cultural association in London. More conventional academic papers, on the other hand, tend to show certainty, they interpret action though explicit frames of reference and models, they search for the generalisable. All this is of course valuable too; the choice between academic writing and blogging is not either / or. As academics we need to be able to engage in different forms of literacy and expand our understanding of the nature of academic work.

6 Concluding comments

In this paper I have reviewed my experiences of, and with, blogs and blogging and discussed some principles of transformative learning. I did not start reading or writing blogs with transformative learning in mind but I have found the transformative learning tradition useful to describe aspects of blogging practice and to set out a framework for developing journaling in the future. In particular what I have learnt is to see autonomy as a mix of private and public concerns, to value a concern for the everyday, to maintain an action orientation and to genuinely search for intersubjectivity. I am intrigued by the opportunities of blogging but accepting that I am describing a niche for a certain type of academic practice.

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