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Chapter 9

Transformative learning and international students negotiating higher education

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The international sojourners who have the courage and determination to move beyond their cultural comfort zone and work through intercultural experiences often possess the potential to be effectively engaged in transformative learning. Brown (2009) states that moving between different life worlds can represent the catalyst for self-discovery and self-reconstruction. Overseas learning indeed entails transformative power. The nature of the sojourn experience in a new intercultural and academic environment involves complex and multidimensional operations. Changes and adaptation to changes underpin the sojourn experience. The specific ways in which individual international students make changes, and their process of adapting to an unfamiliar learning and social environment, are the manifestation of how they exercise personal agency. This process often requires much self-determination, investment and strategy. Such a transformative process involves international students viewing their world from a different perspective (Taylor 1994), and in some cases enables them to develop multiple frames to make sense of the world around them.

This chapter aims to explore the theory of transformative learning as a possible explanation for the changes international students make in their journey to negotiate higher education. The chapter is derived from a doctoral study that involved international Chinese and Vietnamese students’ adaptation to Australian higher education academic practices (Tran 2007). Within this chapter, transformative learning is viewed as a changing process in which international students construct reality through revisiting their existing assumptions and moving towards life-changing developments in their personal and professional perspectives (Cranton 2002; Mezirow 2000). It will be argued in this chapter that international students’ process of negotiating higher education is a dynamic interplay between challenges and transformative power. Cross-border intercultural experiences are intimately linked to opportunities for self-transformation, and the challenging experiences that international students go through indeed foster the conditions for professional development and life-enhancing changes to take place. Given the current lack of theoretical and empirical research on the transformative power of international students, there is a critical need for more research on the transformative characteristics of international students and how best to capitalize on
their potential. In this chapter, I draw on excerpts from two rounds of interviews with individual international students to illustrate the specific ways in which international students have the capacity to transform their own learning and develop life-enhancing skills. The discussion shows that they experience evolution in professional outlook, attitudes and personal qualities through the process of critical self-reflection and adaptation to disciplinary demands in higher education.

The chapter also highlights the contradictions regarding the discursive practices within the current context of international education export. English-medium institutions seek to project themselves as sites where ‘transformations’ take place. But, in reality, the onus of adaptation and intercultural transformation appears to be mainly placed on international students themselves rather than on academics. In addition, whilst theories about international education and the internationalization of the curriculum view transformative learning as being central (Bond 2003; Leask 2005), the majority of the literature on international students’ learning experiences tends to position this student cohort from a problem-based vantage as opposed to transformative learning. In the media, international students are often constructed as ‘commercial products’ and their images are linked to ‘transformations’ and ‘contributions’ to the institutions and host countries but predominantly in the economic sense. In particular, there is little discussion related to how to support the emergence of new, challenging and valuable discourse through validating the transformative potential and diverse dimensions of knowledge that international students bring to academia.

Transformative learning as projected on university web pages for international students

To maintain confidentiality, the universities referred to in this section are not named. University websites have indeed emerged as the dominant sources of information for international students on which to select and base their choice of study destination (Nguyen 2007). Through their websites, universities draw on vocabularies that embrace transformative meanings to construct their institutional identity and promote their image to prospective students. Interestingly universities, regardless of their differing status, utilize similar wordings such as ‘enrich’, ‘empower’, ‘develop’ and ‘change’ to position themselves as a transformation site for international students. For example, the following statement is from the web page specified for international students at a university in Victoria, Australia: ‘this environment ensures all our international students are given the tools that will enrich and empower them both academically and personally’. It appears that this university is linguistically manifested as nurturing a transformative environment for international students to flourish and enrich themselves. Transformative learning is thus promised within this university context. Also drawing on transformation-related language but in an alternative dimension, another university from England tries to connect with international students through positioning...
itself as being a world-leading university in which its international student members are capable of contributing to transforming the university and to building its prestige: ‘our growing cohort of international students informs and enriches our activities, contributing to our ranking as one of the world’s leading universities’. This university is ranked in the top five universities of the world. Clearly the promotional dimension of these universities is shown through the linguistic choices used in their website. It can be seen that host educational providers tend to connect with international students through the discourse of transformative learning through their websites. In other words, through their web pages for international students that work as a recruiting tool and promote the institutions’ status, universities tend to position themselves as supporting and nurturing a transformative learning environment and other-position international students as having the potential to transform their learning.

The official website of the Australian Government, which is used to provide prospective international students with information about studying in Australia, conveys the message: ‘the benefits of living and learning in Australia are both personal and academic. Your years in Australia will give you the best platform to succeed in your career, and prepare you for the challenges of the work place. It won’t just be your mind that develops – your time in the classroom will change you as a person’ (Study in Australia 2011). The key message communicated here is that study in Australia will provide international students with the opportunity to go through both personal and academic transformations. The messages from these universities and the Government website work to construct an identity for both the universities and international students in connection with transformative learning. This discourse places international students in a position to imagine they are the ones who have the potential to transform, and if they take up the invitation to join the university they will become part of a community that nurtures transformative processes.

**Literature on the experiences of international students in host countries**

Ironically the majority of research literature on international students tends to view their learning experiences in the host countries from a problem-oriented vantage as opposed to transformative learning. These studies seem largely to focus on the challenges that international students may encounter in relocating in an unfamiliar environment and in particular their study problems in the host institution (Samuelowicz 1987; Elsey 1990; Ballard and Clanchy 1995; Robertson *et al.* 2000; Lacina 2002). This line of research also explores the coping strategies of international students and how to support them to overcome challenges. As Coate (2009) mentions, while this stream of literature has useful implications for the teaching of international students, it seems to imply that these difficulties are unique to international students, and the overall discourse seems to be orientated toward discussing the deficit aspects of cross-border learning. Kettle (2005) seems
to be among the very few authors who explore the process of a Thai international student in negotiating his disciplinary routes in Australian higher education. This paper documents the transformative power of an international student and re-conceptualizes international students as mobile people who could act as ‘active agents’ in gaining access to their academic world. Apart from Kettle’s work, there is insufficient research examining the issue of how to support international students to maximize their potential and to create a learning environment that nurtures students’ transformative learning in their academic subjects. In particular, the personal transformation and academic growth as a result of cross-border experiences and integration into a new academic culture appear to be largely overlooked in scholarly work on international students. There is also apparently a lack of research and practices examining the ethical commitment to realizing what is promised to offer students in relation to the conditions to transform skills and perspectives in the real classroom context.

The small proportion of literature that looks at the transformative power of international sojourns and migrants tends to draw on theories of culture shock and focus on the aspect of intercultural growth rather than transformation in relation to international students’ learning practices in their discipline (Taylor 1994; Ward et al. 2001; Cushner and Karim 2004; Brown 2009; Milstein 2005). Furthermore, most of these studies investigate the intercultural experiences of migrants or students in exchange programmes rather than in their degree study in the host countries. Shearer (1994, cited in Fenimore 1997) identifies five dimensions of an intercultural identity: 1) acceptance of original and new cultural elements; 2) increased scope, depth and perspective in perception; 3) increased self-knowledge, self-trust and self-directedness; 4) increased inner resilience that facilitates further development; 5) increased creative resourcefulness to deal with new challenges. In fact Kim and Ruben (1988) propose a framework exploring intercultural transformation from two vantages, which they refer to as an adaptation-as-problem perspective and an adaptation-as-growth perspective. These two dimensions imply that the process of adaptation can involve challenges and at the same time foster the condition for growth. The study reported in this chapter draws on examples from international students’ journeys to adapt to higher education academic writing practices in order to illustrate how this process can create space for transformative learning, and how international students are capable of being engaged in transforming themselves and their own learning.

The literature on international sojourns seems to highlight the idea that intercultural experience has transformative potential (Taylor 1994; Ward et al. 2001; Cushner and Karim 2004; Brown 2009). The potential to enhance transcultural understandings through international sojourns is often cited as an aspect of this transformative power (Bochner 1996; Ward et al. 2001; Brown, 2009). Bochner, for example, mentions that international sojourns may facilitate individuals’ development of more ethno-relative views of the world around them. According to Taylor (1994), during the sojourn process the migrant sojourners often adapt to and shift their perspectives in order to accommodate the new
experience and integrate into the host environment. This author attempts to link the transformative power of sojourners to their process of becoming interculturally competent. In particular the author highlights that competent sojourners are not passively conditioned by the new environment but rather are capable of negotiating ‘purpose and meaning’ in intercultural communication. There may be a number of factors that affect this integration process as sojourners differ in their own motivations, personalities, preferences and expectations. Brown (2009: 505) suggests that sojourners’ personal transformation can be linked to ‘a journey of self-discovery as removal from the comfort of the familiar forces them to test and stretch their resourcefulness and to revise their self-understanding’. However, it should be noted that Green (2009) argues for a less idealistic treatment of the automatic connection between studying abroad with cross-cultural understanding. This author calls for more detailed research on the affective factors for transformation or cross-cultural learning to take place.

In short, the majority of the past studies of international students’ academic experiences tend to position them from a deficit model. The body of literature that does explore international students’ transformative potential often focuses on their process of developing intercultural competence and acquiring intercultural knowledge and skills such as tolerance and cultural relativity (Ward et al. 2001; Brown 2009) rather than on their capacity to transform in relation to their academic practices in the host countries. A personal change in outlook and self-understanding is also highlighted in the literature (Taylor 1994; Brown 2009). These areas are the main focus of research on international sojourners partly because these studies are grounded in a tourism-related theoretical framework. However, the changes that are conceptualized within international students’ disciplinary study seem to be little-captured.

**Transformative learning and international education**

Transformative learning refers to a changing process in which learners make meaning and construct reality through revisiting their existing assumptions and moving towards life-changing developments in philosophy and outlook. Cranton (2002), Mezirow (2000) and Taylor (1994) discuss useful perspectives related to transformative learning that can be applied in the context of international students’ changes in personal and professional attitudes and outlooks. Mezirow links transformative learning to a process by which individuals:

transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

(Mezirow 2000: 7–8)
Mezirow highlights the relationship between transformative learning and how the lenses through which individuals can view and interpret the world around them can be reconstructed. In a similar vein, Cranton (2002: 64) relates transformative learning to individuals' ability to critically examine their own existing views, be willing to appreciate alternatives and shift the ways they make sense of the world. These three studies view individuals' critical reflection on their own perspectives and experiences as instrumental in their transformative learning process.

Transformative learning is viewed to be fundamental in research on international education and internationalizing the curriculum. In a study on international students on a Malaysia-based campus of an Australian university, Pyvis and Chapman (2007) found that the aspiration to transform their own perspective and enrich their international experience is the primary motive for international students to undertake an international education. These authors termed this type of investment in international education as 'self-transformative' investment. This finding is echoed by Kingston and Forland (2008), who argue that one of international students' primary purposes in choosing to study overseas is to transform themselves rather than conforming to a fixed set of academic conventions of the host institutions.

Research also conceptualizes the internationalization of the curriculum as being related to transformative learning. Indeed both Morey (2000) and Bond (2003) highlight transformative capacity in their definition of the internationalization of the curriculum. Morey (2000: 28) argues that internationalizing the curriculum should be seen as a process that involves different levels of transformation rather than a 'static outcome'. In the model of an internationalized curriculum proposed by this author, a 'transformed stage' is the highest level of development in which both international and domestic diversity play key roles in the internationalized curriculum. Bond (2003) identifies three approaches to internationalizing the curriculum: the 'add-on' approach, the 'infusion' approach and the 'transformation' approach. The add-on approach represents the process of simply adding international or intercultural dimensions to the existing curricula. Infusion refers to a curriculum that provides students with the opportunity to be exposed to international and multicultural perspectives. This approach is more systematic than the add-on and more commonly used. The transformation approach, which is seen as the most advanced approach in internationalizing the curriculum, aims to encourage international and domestic students into new ways of thinking and making sense of the world, critically examine existing assumptions within the traditional curriculum and construct their reality through the lenses of diverse groups. A study conducted by Leask (2005) also shows that staff and students construct the internationalization of the curriculum as being related to the opportunity to be transformed by intercultural interactions.

Theories about international education and the internationalization of the curriculum inherently view transformative learning as a core component. In the relatively limited number of studies on international students' purposes in undertaking an international education, many international students are found
to be motivated in pursuing an international education with the aspiration to transform their perspectives (Pyvis and Chapman 2007; Tran and Nyland 2010). Within the most advanced frameworks of internationalizing the curriculum, international students are similarly positioned to be involved in a process of critical examination and transcendence of the ‘taken for granted’ assumptions while transforming their personal and professional attitudes. Clearly there is an immense gap between the positioning of international students in relation to international education and the internationalization of the curriculum, and the literature on international students’ experiences, which largely looks at international students from a deficit viewpoint. Such a mismatch of the theory related to the internationalization of the curriculum and the literature on international students also shows that institutions and current academic practices do not focus on capitalizing on international students’ potential to transform their perspectives and translate their presence and the ‘capital’ that they bring to academia into valuable resources for transformative learning for both international and domestic students.

In the public domain, international students are often described in relation to the education export industry. In Australia, for example, the picture of international students is often depicted in relation to a $18 billion industry. International students are often compared to commercial products such as coal or iron ore. The media also draws on terms such as ‘transformation’ or ‘transform’ in talking about international students but in another sense: for example, an article entitled ‘Foreign students transform city’ (Rout 2007) focuses exclusively on how international students transform Melbourne in terms of the cash flow to the city. Others refer to how the $18 billion dollars from education export help to transform Australia in economic terms. Therefore despite educational institutions’ efforts in positioning themselves as transformation sites and other-positioning of international students as possessing the transformative power in relation to academic and cultural aspects, international students are ironically constructed in the local media as ‘cash cows’ whose transformative power is linked to their contribution to the host country’s economy.

The study

The study reported in this chapter analyses how eight Chinese and Vietnamese international students exercise personal agency and mediate their academic writing to adapt to disciplinary practices in Education and Commerce at an Australian university. Chinese and Vietnamese international students of education and economics were selected for this study for a number of reasons. China is one of the leading sources of international students for Australian higher education. At the university where this study was conducted, international students from China comprise the largest proportion of international students. In addition, at this university, there has been an emerging postgraduate student growth from Vietnam. Economics is the biggest faculty and it has the largest enrolment of international students at the university where this study was conducted. Education
is one of the disciplines of the university that has recently seen a rising trend in the international student cohort. The students in this study were required to meet the cut-off IELTS score of 7.0 and 6.5 in order to gain entry to their one-and-a-half year masters course in education and economics respectively (Tran 2007).

The data were a combination of two rounds of interviews with the students and their own assignments. The methods for data collection include the *talk around text* with students (Lillis 2001), the positioning interviews six months later and their written texts. With the consent of the students, their first written assignments at the Australian university were collected. These texts would then be used for the students to reflect on their specific experiences of writing them. The first essays written by the Vietnamese and Chinese students have been chosen to be the focus of the study because these are probably the most challenging for international students to write. International students' first texts for their masters course are often where the clash between disciplinary requirements and their former interpretations of writing occurs. Hence, the first written work is often the place where students have to negotiate their initial interpretations of academic writing and the disciplinary requirements. Each student participant was invited to a one-hour interview in which she/he was asked to talk about the selected text. The talk aimed to engage students in an exploration of their practices of writing these specific texts and how they exercised personal agency to mediate their writing and adapt to their disciplinary requirements. The *talk around text* (Lillis 2001) was conducted from four to eight weeks after the students had completed these texts. The positioning interviews with the Vietnamese and Chinese international students were conducted six months after the *talk around text*. The positioning interviews allow space for the students to reposition their views and reflect on any changes with regard to their interpretations and expectations of academic writing they may go through as they progress through their course. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were adopted. The interviews were then transcribed. All respondents presented in this study have been given pseudonyms.

The issues of personal agency and personal transformation of Vietnamese and Chinese international students in their participation in disciplinary writing practices are important concerns in this study, as academic writing is a central dimension of meaning making in higher education. New (1994) argues that people, as agents, can act intentionally and have potential choice to make changes to the world in which they live. International students' process of making meaning at the tertiary level can also be referred to as a process of negotiation. This in part originates in their effort to meet course requirements and lecturers' expectations, which to some degree represent the disciplinary systems of knowledge and beliefs. This process is also related to the values and beliefs shaped by students' cultural and personal preferences. In this chapter, the analysis of the data will draw on the theory of transformative learning as a framework to interpret and analyse international students' aspiration and capacity to be engaged in transformative learning. The following key dimensions of transformative learning identified by Mezirow (1991) and Taylor (1994) are used to shed light on the analysis of
international students’ process of negotiating meaning and transforming their personal and professional perspectives: engaging in critical reflection, linking to prior experiences and developing intercultural competency. In addition, Brown’s (2009) assumption about the connection between the confrontation of challenges and the development self-efficiency is also drawn on to interpret international students’ personal growth.

**Transforming perspectives through critical reflection**

Mezirow (1991) and Taylor (1994) identify reflection as an important dimension of perspective transformation. In his discussion of the learning process of intercultural competency, Taylor (1994: 170) links reflective orientation to a cognitive process whereby ‘participants made a conscious connection between their cultural disequilibrium, possible behavioural learning strategies and necessary change towards competency’. All the participants in this study engaged in reflection throughout their process of negotiating their ways of constructing knowledge in higher education. An example of reflective orientation was described by Wang, a Chinese international student, in her talk around how she constructed meaning for her first assignment for her masters course at the Australian University. She recalled a milestone that has helped to shape her view on the use of personal experience and personal pronouns:

> When I read Jill’s [the lecturer] doctoral thesis, it’s just like I read a novel . . . It’s very interesting about personal experience. It’s amazing at that time and after I read her thesis, I talked to Jill about her thesis and I said ‘I can never expect you wrote your Ph.D. thesis like that’ because it’s her personal account – my experience in China and how I dealt with different kinds of situations. At that time, I feel that it’s like a process, first you use ‘I’ and at that time you don’t know anything about academic writing and then you adapt to the Western style of writing, you avoid using ‘I’ and after that when you are mature enough in the field, you start using ‘I’ again because you know how to use ‘I’ appropriately in your writing . . . Now I think I am not competent enough to use ‘I’. Maybe 5 years later when I, for example, develop myself as a beginning scholar, after I finish the thesis, I can label myself as a beginning scholar. And then 5 years later when I do a lot of research in the area, I gain more confidence with the understanding of the knowledge and of the theory, have my own understanding, when you understand something or you think you really understand something, I think you are brave enough to say ‘I think’ or ‘According to my experience’.

(Wang)

The quote above illustrated that Wang’s initial belief about the use of ‘I’ and personal experience of academic writing, which she developed when entering her
disciplinary discourse, appeared to be challenged as she read her lecturer’s thesis and had a conversation with her lecturer. Wang’s word usage, ‘It’s very interesting’, ‘It’s just like I read a novel’, ‘It’s amazing . . .’, ‘I can never expect . . .’, indicated how powerful the role of her lecturer’s thesis and her lecturer’s way of writing was in reshaping her attitude. She repositioned her interpretation of the use of the personal pronoun and personal experience in academic writing in light of what she learnt from her lecturer’s writing. The international student here positioned herself as an active constructor of knowledge in discourse and also a reflexive constructor of the self. From Wang’s perspective, her previous use of ‘I’ and personal experience in writing sprang from her ignorance of academic writing practice and her identity as a novice in the field of language teaching. As for Wang, her latter use of personal terms like ‘I’ or ‘my’ to express her views and her experience, which she believed to be more appropriate than her former use, was associated with her deeper awareness of academic writing conventions, her growing confidence, her understanding of professional knowledge and her maturity as a ‘beginning scholar’. Wang’s attempt to express her personal agency through using personal experience and personal pronouns was like a journey of constructing meanings, through which she experienced shifts in her perceptions as she deepened her understanding. Her account illustrates that transformative learning emerged from her capacity to critically reflect on her exposure to different ways of meaning making which provides her with the condition for the discovery, negotiation and reconstruction of the self (Giddens 1991). In other words, the international student’s capacity to engage herself in reflective orientation (Taylor 1994) actually leads to a change in meaning perspective.

The international students in this study tended to be flexible in adapting to what they interpreted as the academic requirements of their own discipline. They continuously reshaped their interpretation of ways of constructing knowledge in their discipline through self-reflection and reflection on others’ views. For example, Ying, a Chinese student of commerce, articulated her approach to mediate meaning and understanding in her disciplinary practices in Australian higher education:

You need to think from other perspectives but not always from your own side to see the things. You must try different angles and sometimes you argue with yourself because you need to tell if your opinion is sustainable or has a standing . . . I have to evaluate other people’s work, that’s my critical thinking . . . You need to argue with yourself. When I write, of course I did argue with myself.

(Ying)

Ying demonstrated a strong sense of self-reflection and critical thinking in her process of negotiating understanding in higher education. She referred to her efforts in raising and answering questions as the ways she argued with herself: ‘Is this valid?’, ‘Is this appealing to myself at least?’, ‘Do I trust this statement?’ The
ways Ying mediated and constructed knowledge were linked to posing questions concerning the validity and reliability of others' work and re-examining her own perspective. Ying self-positioned as a student who projected an outlook that was not locked in her own circle but instead interacted with alternative perspectives. In particular, the sense of self was shown to be integrative, developmental and evolving. Ying's illustration emulates Cranton's (2002) view of transformative learning which is related to individuals' ability to critically examine their own existing views, be willing to appreciate alternatives and shift the ways they make sense of the world.

Engaging in transformative learning through linking to one's own prior experiences

Cranton (2002) and Taylor (1994) view individuals' critical reflection on their own perspectives and experiences as being instrumental in their transformative learning process. In this study all the students indicated that they actually drew on their previous personal or professional experiences, either explicitly or implicitly, in their process of constructing knowledge in Australian higher education. However, they did not always demonstrate such a validation of prior experiences on the surface of their text due to the understanding that such experiences were not expected in academic writing by their lecturers. Making the links between the theories learnt from the course and their personal experiences could lead to the development of disciplinary knowledge and the change in perspective. This is illustrated by Lin and Binh when they revealed how they drew on their personal experiences in their process of developing knowledge in their discipline during the second interview:

Yeah. While I was reading those experts and those authors ... I will justify my own criteria whether it suits my situation, my particular context or not.

(Lin)

Sometimes the evidence from the book is not appropriate in your own context, so you need something from your own to compare with their opinion, you can say that 'it’s nice in other context but in my case, my learners are blah blah ... so it’s not appropriate'.

(Binh)

Both Lin and Binh viewed their personal experience and knowledge about the specific context in their home countries as valuable resources to reflect on and be critical of the experts’ opinion. Most learners indeed have a personal history, life and professional experience that they can carry with them during their journey to live and study in another country for an extended period of time. When international students move across national borders and engage in a new learning environment, memories of their life history and past experiences can become vivid
and can provide them with a springboard for reflection and building upon. Lillis (2001) refers to this as the voice of experience that international students embrace in their intercultural learning context.

Both international students in the above excerpts positioned themselves as learners who are able to identify the gaps between published research they were exposed to in their study in Australia and what was actually happening in their Vietnamese and Chinese contexts. This finding echoes Taylor’s (1994) comment on the relationship between transformative learning and the development of intercultural competency, and that the participant is not a ‘passive recipient’ of knowledge in the host learning environment but instead appears to be capable of actively negotiating their understanding of knowledge. The students’ capacity to integrate and justify the validation of the knowledge they learn, based on their understanding of their own contexts and their personal experiences, matches the description by Mezirow (1991: 167) of a transformed perspective as a ‘more inclusive, discriminating and integrative perspective’. However, while Mezirow’s model of transformative learning does not highlight the impact of students’ prior experiences on their transformative learning, this study indicates that international students actually draw on their prior experiences in their process of knowledge construction and perspective transformation in the new learning context.

Despite international students having the potential to transform their professional outlook and develop new approaches to learning, most often the unfamiliar and diverse ways of learning and constructing knowledge that they bring with them into the new learning context are considered unfit, problematic or even inferior to the conventions and the academic practices taken for granted in the host institutions (Cochran-Smith 2003). In addition, their different experiences as a result of their prior schooling, working and socialization in their home countries are often viewed as being limited or negative (Carrington 2007). If those unfamiliar experiences and transformative potential are not recognized in the educational transaction in the new context, this is a waste of pedagogical resource and cultural vistas that can be utilized to open up positive, new and challenging learning opportunities for international students, local students and teaching staff themselves.

Seeing the confrontation of hardship as the opportunity to learn and transform themselves

The international students in this study indicated that an initial source of challenge and stress could provide the foundation for personal growth and the enrichment of knowledge. For example, Wang, a Chinese student, revealed:

Now I know everything because I went through the process and I gain a lot. I think the big success for me is that now I am confident . . . Yes, even I have to struggle and I consider the process of struggle as the way to learn things and I don't want to stick to my own ways.

(Wang)
Wang indicated that the challenging process of meaning making in her discipline led to a consequent rise in her self-belief and confidence as well as in the development of new knowledge. This echoes Brown’s (2009: 510) statement that ‘self-efficacy was therefore the product of the confrontation with hardship’. The process of struggle and negotiation, the development of internal strength and the accumulation of knowledge are positively associated with one another during the international student’s negotiation of higher education. The student indeed felt empowered after going through this process of negotiation.

In a similar vein, Vy, a Vietnamese student, and Ying, a Chinese student, elaborated on how their initial feelings of being challenged and pressured could be translated into a new capacity to learn and transform their ways of constructing knowledge for their course:

In general, I love this assignment because even though I found it challenging, finally I found that I learnt something from there, the language I learnt it, new words, new kinds of expressions.

(Vy)

The whole process you work on writing the assignment, including research, finding the materials and writing is quite interesting, even though you feel pressured, sometimes depressed ... I think that’s real experience, we learn something ... I want to make it interesting and I need to use words with imagination. This is really my understanding of things.

(Ying)

The words ‘struggle’, ‘challenging’, ‘hard’ and ‘pressured’ were used by the students in association with the word ‘learn’ in order to refer to the growth in both personal and academic terms that they experienced as a result of the confrontation with the challenges in constructing and negotiating meaning in their discipline.

The development of new learning skills and knowledge as a result of the tough process of participating in disciplinary writing practices indeed has the potential to influence international students’ further study and future life. This is also highlighted by Lin, a Chinese student:

But here I mean though it’s genius, it’s quite hard, quite tough at first ... quite a complicated learning process ... I think what I learnt which is more important and will contribute to my further learning and my future life, not just to learn to write in English is how to do a writing, an academic writing, I mean the writing process is actually involves a lot, not just writing ... I think, for many other things for making a presentation, for many other things, you need that kind of ability, to integrate different parts, to give order to them and to come up with the product. That’s what’s helpful.

(Lin)
Lin attempted to make sense of her own experience through which she developed new academic skills and capacities that have long-term implications for her professional growth as well as personal life. The challenging and complex nature of the process of relocating to a new learning environment and adapting to new academic demands represents the springboard for transformative learning to take place. Importantly, the examples from international students' personal journeys of negotiating higher education show that they viewed the hardship that they went through as being positive and rewarding. This is because such hardship helps to enrich their lives, increase their resourcefulness and prepare them to deal with new challenges. This has been presented by Shearer (1994, cited in Fenimore 1997) as one of the important qualities of an ‘intercultural identity’ that international sojourners possess.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the discourse of ‘transformative learning’ in relation to international students within the university context by looking at different vantages: the literature on international students' learning experiences, the theoretical frameworks of international education and transformative learning, university websites, the media and data from a study on international students' negotiation of disciplinary writing in higher education. The analysis reveals the contradictions of the discursive practices related to transformative learning and international students within the current context of international education. As shown in the above discussion, the international students in this study self-position as embracing an aspiration to transform themselves and actually underwent significant moves in their participation in Australian higher education. The process of negotiating higher education represents a dynamic interplay between challenges and transformative power; the removal from comfort zones and the need to overcome challenges and navigate a plurality of academic demands and values actually creates spaces for international students to undergo fundamental personal and academic changes. It is the challenging and complex nature of the process of negotiating higher education that enables international students to negotiate shifting borders, discover their internal strength and experience movements in their perspectives. This process also provides the springboard for the emergence of the newly constructed self. This study shows that international students are capable of reflecting on their own experiences, appreciating the need for change and plotting new strategies to transform themselves personally and academically. Critical self-reflection is identified as being central to international students’ process of mediating higher education.

Within the current discursive practices, universities through their web pages are strategically drawing on the metaphor of ‘transformative learning’ as an attraction to international students. In this sense, international students are other-positioned by the university as having the potential to transform in the host learning environment, and the university self-positions as creating the environment...
in which international students can be effectively engaged in transformative learning. The theory of international education also constructs the internationalization of the curriculum as being related to the opportunity for both international and domestic students to be transformed. Ironically, in the public domain international students are often constructed as ‘cash cows’, ‘users of educational services’ or ‘commercial products’. Furthermore, in the literature international students are mainly viewed from a problem-focused vantage. In other words, an adaptation-as-problem approach (Kim and Ruben 1988) is the dominant framework shaping the majority of studies on the academic experiences of international students. Also, within the current institutional context, most often the English and learning support unit focuses predominantly on remedying the difficulties international students face, while there is an absence of efforts placed on developing specific practices and exploring approaches to validating international students’ potential and their existing but perhaps ‘hidden’ strengths in negotiating higher education. This discourse is contrary to the ways universities attempt to project themselves as sites embracing transformations and other-position international students as being capable of influencing academic practices and transforming their learning.

Based on the findings of this study, I would argue for the need to move beyond the discourse that problematizes international students’ learning, to recognizing and reconstructing international students as having the potential to transform their learning as well as their lives. I do not view their study journey as a smooth sail, but instead acknowledge that the challenges that have been captured in the majority of the literature concerning international students studying in English-medium institutions are part of a cross-border journey and relocation in another country. However, I believe that the process through which international students’ transformative potential is identified and validated deserves more empirical research and should be added to the current practices where it is mainly their challenges that are highlighted and dealt with. More research is needed to explore their aspirations in relation to transformative learning, and in particular the different layers and dimensions of international students’ transformative capacity. This study also highlights the significance of the past experiences that international students draw on as a springboard for their transformative learning in the host institutions. Therefore it is critical for academics to learn about their international students’ past experiences and learning traditions, and draw on these aspects as valuable resources for facilitating international students’ transformative learning. This is associated with academics’ attempts to adapt and change pedagogies and curricula in teaching international students. In order to capitalize on international students’ transformative power, it is also imperative to identify what represents opportunities for transformative learning in working with international students in specific courses, how to create these opportunities and how to promote them effectively. This aspect should be highlighted in any conceptual framework as well as any toolkit that provides instructions about internationalizing the curriculum. This is a significant step towards ensuring that what is promised on university
Transformative learning websites in relation to the teaching and learning of international students, and what has been theorized as central to international education, can be translated into the development of curriculum and pedagogic practices. Those practices that recognize and capitalize on international students as agents capable of mediating their own academic practices will help address international students' intrinsic motives that are bound to transformative learning, and empower them to negotiate and draw creatively on institutional practices.

References


