

CHAPTER D6

The Nature of Immersive Experience

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Sarah is just starting a PhD in the Psychology Department at the University of Surrey. Prior to this she was a psychology undergraduate student. Sarah also recognises the importance of immersion in her own life. This study was undertaken while she was on her professional training work placement with SCEPTrE.

Our proposition

Being immersed in an extremely challenging and unfamiliar experience might be very uncomfortable or even distressing but such experiences can be transformative and help us develop insights, confidence and capabilities for tackling similar situations in future. The professional role often requires immersion in complex situations and challenges, it stands to reason that preparing students for such immersive experiences should be part of a higher education. Gaining a better understanding of the nature of immersive experience will help us recognise and accommodate immersion, give better support for learners who are involved in such experiences and help them understand better the nature of the learning through such experiences.

This Chapter provides a perspective on the nature of immersive experience based on two studies undertaken in 2008. The first study involved the analysis of forty three personal stories of immersive experiences donated by participants in SCEPTrE's 'Immersive Experience' conference. The second study involved an analysis of 26 stories of immersive experiences submitted by students to a competition in January 2008.



Introduction

Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical and emotional experience of being submerged in water. The expression, '*being immersed in*', is often used to describe a state of being which can have both negative consequences – being overwhelmed, engulfed, submerged or stretched, and positive consequences – being deeply absorbed or engaged in a situation or problem that results in mastery of a complex and demanding situation. *Being immersed in* an extremely challenging experience might be very uncomfortable but it is particularly favourable for the development of insights, confidence and capabilities for learning to live and work with complexity, uncertainty and messiness – conditions that are all too frequent in the professional world. It is in these situations that we need to draw on both our intellectual and our creative resourcefulness and this is where we might usefully explore possible links with Mihayli Cszenzmihayli's concept of '*Flow*'. Because of these intriguing and important learning dimensions to the experience of being immersed we wanted to find out more about how people experience it and how higher education might either create and/or facilitate learning from such experiences.

This Chapter summarises the results of two studies undertaken at the University of Surrey. The first was an appreciative enquiry undertaken in January 2008 as part of a conference held at the University of Surrey. The conference was deliberately structured to facilitate enquiry through conversation and story telling about personal immersive experiences. Participants were invited to record a story about an experience that they had had which they believed engaged them in an immersive way (an immersive experience). Forty three stories were donated:
<http://immersiveexperience.pbwiki.com/Stories+of+immersive+experiences>

Participants were invited to say something about:

- the context/situation/challenge
- the particular characteristics of the situation that engaged them in an immersive way.
- the forms of learning / personal development / change that emerged from the situation
- the words/concepts/feelings would you use to describe the immersive experience
- the principles or lessons that can be drawn from the story. For example, how could this story inform designs and enrich opportunities for learning through immersive experience in higher education?

Important features of immersive experience were summarised in a series of working papers.

The second study involved an analysis of 26 stories of immersive experiences submitted by students to a competition in January 2008. The invitation contained a series of prompts...list but these were intended to stimulate not constrain story telling. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to identify themes that were present in most accounts. The final stage of processing used these themes as an analytical tool to re-examine the forty three accounts of the earlier study.

What is an immersive experience?

The vocabulary used to describe experiences that participants feel are immersive (Figures 1 and 2) is rich and reflects the complexity of the experiences and the emotional effects on participants. Within this rich vocabulary a number of conceptual patterns can be recognised.

Situations that require an intense level of engagement and lots of concentration and energy

Words like – absorbing, challenge, consuming, determination, discipline, driven, engagement, energetic, immersed, intense and intensive, perseverance, powerful, relentless, self motivation, self reliance, spell-binding, staying power, steep learning curve, time consuming.

Situations that require emotional engagement

Words like – anxiety, anxious, despair, despondency, distraught, doubt, ecstasy, emotional, embarrassment, enjoyment, every emotion, excitement, fear, humiliation, irritated, joy, exhilaration, fear, frustration, happiness, lonely, loneliness, painful, passion, pride, sadness, satisfaction, scared, stressed, swallowed by gloom, uncomfortable.

Situations that are extremely challenging, sometimes difficult to describe in ways that capture the complexity, in which risk and fear are often associated

Words like – alarming, all-encompassing, anxiety, frequent use of challenging, competing interests
complex – complexity, demanding, discomfort, engulfing, exciting, exhilarating, fear of failure, hectic, indescribable, messiness, overwhelming, preoccupying, taxing, taking risks, terrifying, time consuming, turbulence, uniqueness, unexpected, unexplored, uncertainty, unnerving.

‘for me the level of immersion seems to be in inverse proportion to my ability to talk about my thinking’.

Situations that are uncomfortable or frightening

Words like – alarming, anxiety, cold, discomfort, distressing, lonely and loneliness, scary, terrifying, uncertainty, unnerving, worrying. ‘I continually felt out of my comfort zone’. ‘I was forced to exist out of my comfort zone.’

Situations where people do not feel in control, involve states of perplexity and uncertainty

Words like –bewildering, confused, chaos, completely uprooted. ‘I felt out of my depth’ contradicting, confused, daunted, engulfed, helpless, hardship, I’m only human, indecision, self-doubt, swamped, turbulence

Situations that are not known and require exploration

Words like – unexpected, unexplored, uncertainty, exploring, familiar yet new, full of potential, hidden perspective, strange, surprising. ‘We explored the concepts.’

Situations that stimulate and require reflection and discovery of self

It made me reflect on my own skills and attitudes..

The impetus to appreciate reflection...far more constructively than hitherto

To recognise the importance of feedback

My questioning and exploration of self

Self-doubt

Situations that require creativity

Words like – adaptability, creativity, creatively stimulating

A sense of personal change, growth and gain

Words like – achievement, awareness [greater sense of], beneficial, ‘changing me for the better’, developmental, empowering and empowerment, enlightening, enriching, freedom to learn and be myself, grow and growing, insightful, integrative, invaluable, learning, liberating, life changing, meaningful, new understanding, nurturing, overcome, re-emerges, releasing, revelatory, rewarding, self-affirming, self motivation, self reliance, transcendent, transforming.

A sense of satisfaction, confidence and happiness in coming to terms with or mastering a difficult situation and a creating a new sense of wellbeing

Words like – celebratory, confidence boosting, empowering, happiness, rewarding, satisfaction, satisfying, pride.

What sorts of contexts do people associate with immersive experiences?

Contexts identified in personal stories of immersive experiences include:

- *Challenging language/cultural situations* – like travel, voluntary service or work in other countries typically compounded by lack of knowledge about the society and language and sometimes compounded with issues like poverty or poor security. Finding yourself as a white middle class teenager in a black African-American urban culture.
- *Challenging work situations* – particularly first jobs or new roles, planning and overseeing major events, engaging others, and *creative work challenge like writing a book*
- *Intensive learning processes and environments that others have created*
- *Intensive self-created learning processes particularly relating to postgraduate research*
- *Highly engaged participation in a religious/political activity*
- *Intensive engagement in leisure activities*
- *Intensive engagement in artistic enterprise and performance*

The stories of immersive experiences show that the experiences that were selected to embody the idea of immersion were predominantly experiences of choice. Most stories involve people putting themselves into new/unfamiliar and challenging, even risky situations. Many story tellers deliberately and voluntarily put themselves into challenging environments like taking on a job in another country with no knowledge of the language or culture or a new organisation with little relevant experience, or they have chosen to engage in particular work, educational, self-study or leisure activities that they have found challenging.

In some cases story tellers made a familiar place unfamiliar in order to enhance the challenge of the experience - like the story of off-road cycling at night. Here a familiar environment was rendered unfamiliar by the loss of sensory information as a result of riding a bicycle off-road in the dark. The experience demanded other than other senses become heightened.

Most of the stories are positive and affirming in the sense that even when the experience was uncomfortable good things generally emerged but we also have to recognise that there are circumstances for immersive experience where good things will not emerge. We must also recognise that there will be situations where people find themselves immersed in something for reasons beyond their control ie they have not chosen to be in the situation, where life suddenly moves in a direction that was not anticipated and they are precipitated into unfamiliar territory.

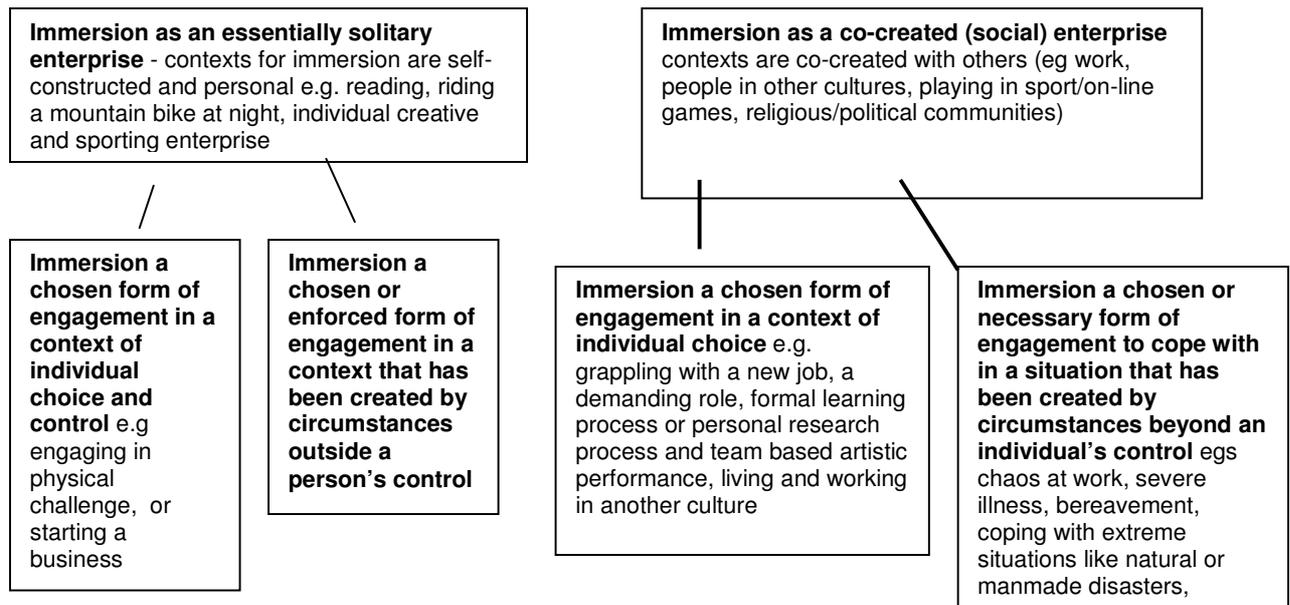
Based on the stories of immersive experiences we can define two sorts of overarching contexts Figure 3.

The first category embraces those experiences where immersion is essentially a solitary enterprise (ie the individual creates the experience through their thinking and actions and does not seek to involve anyone else). The experience of being immersed in a book, the athlete immersed in a training programme, the musician rehearsing for a concert, the scientist undertaking laboratory research that doesn't involve engaging other people, riding off-road at night, playing sophisticated games against a computer, are all examples of such experiences. We might envisage two situations for immersive solitary enterprise: 1) where an individual constructs the environment and conditions for immersive experience 2) where circumstances or the environment strongly influences or demands an immersive response from an individual. For example stories of endurance and survival in hostile environments might fall in the later.

The second overarching category is where the immersive experience is much more of a social enterprise - it is co-created through complex social interactions and collaborative enterprise. Again we might envisage two scenarios: 1)

where an individual places themselves in a challenging social situation and chooses to engage in an immersive way – examples might include grappling with a new job or complex work problem, engaging deeply in a learning process or team based artistic performance, prolonged travel / exposure in another country/culture with a partner ; 2) where rapid and significant changes in circumstances or the environment require an immersive response in order to get through/survive an event – examples of situations might include severe illness within the family, death of a loved one, coping with natural or manmade disasters.

Figure 3 Contexts for immersive experience



Many experiences are likely to contain a mix of solitary and social activity

Types of immersive experiences

Four different types of immersive experience can be distinguished in the two studies:

- 1) Experiences that are essentially pleasurable and risk free and do not encounter conditions that are stressful or distressing – like being immersed in a book.
- 2) Experiences that may contain within them pleasurable experiences and outcomes but which also contain physically, intellectually and emotionally challenging, stressful or distressing situations;
- 3) Experiences that are intended to 'block out the light' rather than lead to enlightenment the murky side of immersive experience. Here immersion has 'links' with homogenisation, 'brain-washing' and the repression of difference.
- 4) Experiences that are painful and distressing, like serious illness or bereavement. They are dominated by emotional low points and outcomes are not generally positive or beneficial.

Common features of immersive experiences

According to Baud (2010: 8) immersive experience normally involves:

- multiple episodes over time that need to be considered singularly and collectively and typically involves participation in an environment unfamiliar to the learner
- learners allowing themselves to be fully part of it: intensive and holistic engagement is a characteristic of immersive experience
- reflection after the event in order to learn from the experience and to be aware that one has learned from it, for meaning to be made and for this to be appropriated into ones wider repertoire of knowledge and skill.

All these things were reflected in the accounts of immersive experiences but the most striking feature was that, despite the huge variety in situations described, there were many similarities in the underlying themes, emotions, changes and experiences of the participants.

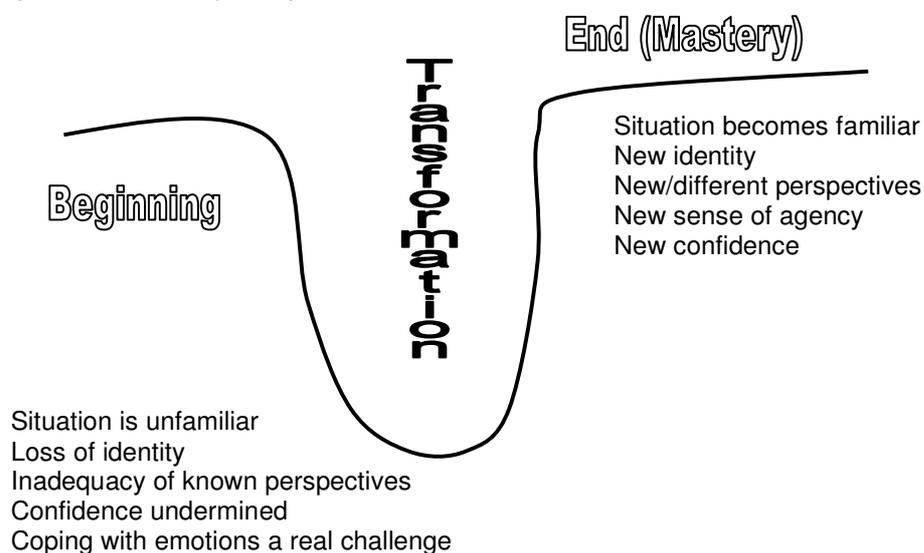
Sense of journey – typically with a beginning (anticipation or apprehension), middle (being overwhelmed), end (sense of mastering or coming to terms with a situation). This sense of journey is the overall superordinate theme to emerge from the accounts. This journey is a feature in many of the themes and sub themes, as it appears this journey underpins transformation/change/learning, that is associated with immersive experience.

“similar to the process in which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly”

“It is a transforming process”

Most accounts exhibited the initial part of the experience, often viewed with excitement and positive expectations, as distinct to the middle and the end (Figure 4). The middle displayed feelings of being overwhelmed and questioning the choices and experience and the end showed the individual as accepting and embracing the experience, having gained control. Individuals recognised that in the case of the experience continuing, it would continue to be immersive but they felt they had control and had learnt strategies to cope with the challenges of the experience.

Figure 4 A sense of journey



Another feature of the stage-like process also involved how participants felt about the experience. In most cases, this staged process began with positive feelings, which then progressed to very negative feelings, and finally continued into the final stage where participants felt more deeply positive than initially, with a much greater understanding and appreciation of what was going on.

Another feature of the staged-process was that of coping and strategies. Most stories inferred that people felt they had the necessary knowledge, cognitive and affective skills at the beginning of the experience to cope with it. But this stage often gave way to realisations that individuals did not have the necessary skills/knowledge or strategies to handle the situation (*"My intellect and understanding is shaken to timidness with all this strangeness"*). They had not appreciated how difficult or lonely it would be. This realisation forced people to change, adapt and acquire new strategies and knowledge in order to cope with the challenges in their experience. This change pushed them into the final stage, which showed students with more developed strategies and awareness, taking them into the final stage of the process where people believed they had mastered or gained enough experience and changed sufficiently to feel a sense of control. *"So here I was now, suddenly able, having once been commanded by inability"*

The sense of transformation that people gain through immersive experience is attributed to this pattern of a journey in which a sense of confidence is replaced by a lack of confidence and the necessity to adapt to the situation.

Emotions

Many emotions were expressed in personal accounts of immersive experience, including fear, happiness, excitement, shame, unhappiness. What is apparent is that during an immersive experience, very strong, almost overwhelming, emotions are encountered. These strong emotions, in many cases, compelled the participant to change or to re-evaluate, either to attain or maintain a positive emotion.

It is clear emotions play a very important and central role in an immersive experience, and it is this experience of strong emotions and the need to manage strong emotions that leaves such an impact and makes the experience so valuable and memorable. It is apparent that any experience that elicits strong emotions, makes it very personal and can motivate the person to engage with difficult or challenging situations. Emotions seem to serve the role of motivating a person to change and to persist in difficult situations.

In some stories participants had to suppress emotions (*"On the other hand, you have to be calm and collected"*). In most cases this was necessary in order to maintain an external representation of oneself, and so as not to fall apart during the experience. This awareness of and ability to manage emotions seems important in an immersive experience, and this form of control, that is suppression, is perhaps the pre-cursor to the participant gaining control over the situation as a whole. This emotional suppression/control is the internal indication to the person they need to change in some way to cope with the situation, to 're-balance' the strong emotions, so the emotions become a signal and then a motivation for change.

"What kept me persevering was my passion"

"I've never felt so proud of myself"

"The choice...came from a desire"

"I was surprised, but very happy about. This spurred me on to do different events"

"...a new level of responsibility. This responsibility motivated me to make the café as good as I can...I felt a high level of enjoyment"

"now the tears gushed forth from his eyes"

"every emotion"

"after months of emotional entanglement, I found myself so caught up"

"creating waves of emotion inside you".

Immersive experiences can be lonely experiences even when there are lots of other people involved. This sense of loneliness may also heighten the emotional experience.

"He felt himself cut off from the world"

"I was often lonely"

"Life felt transient, monotonous, lonely"

In general, participants becoming more expert in handling their emotions as a result of the experience and immersive experiences serve well the idea of developing capability for coping with and managing strong emotions in the future.

“could make myself more emotionally available”

“I’ve learnt to cry, to feel pain...it’s essential to talk to people about them”

Choice

In many cases this was choice to engage with the experience, but in all cases it was also a choice to remain in the situation and choice of what to do in order to cope with the situation. This choice really involves the will to do; that is the will to act in an immersive way. Many participants were aware of how challenging the situation could be, and in some cases this informed the choice to engage with it. However, it needs to be noted that in most cases, what people expected the challenges to be often turned out *not* to be the most difficult parts of the experiences. It is possible to assume therefore, that a certain type of person chooses to engage in immersive experiences, and that people have a choice of whether to remain in them and what to do with the experience (*“I must continue”; “I could have kept within my comfort zone of knowledge and ability but in broadening the remit the engagement became greater”*). This can be linked to the presentation of situational status, in terms of conceptions of being heroic, or the need to challenge oneself and, rather than fail, develop strategies to overcome difficulties.

“I elected”

“I either had to tackle...or walk away...”

“But I was confident in my choice”

“I wanted to run, get out of her life because it hurt too much. I didn’t want to face it anymore. But I stayed”.

“There is a choice whether or not to tackle the wall and I guess the decision depends on how important it is to achieve the new level of expertise”

Presentation of situational status

Several stories related the environment they were entering into with reference to status, such as *‘one of the leading’*, or *‘sending its best and brightest into places where angels feared to tread’*. This is interpreted as the need to justify the difficulties experienced by that person as valid, showing the context or environment as exceptional. It could also be a need for the participant in order to understand why it was such a challenging experience and to validate them in terms of their ability, therefore ensuring it was the situation as opposed to the person leading to the difficulties experienced. This links to the above point of conceptions of being heroic, and demonstrates the type of person to immerse themselves is the type of person that chooses, or has the will, to enter or remain in a situation they recognise will be challenging.

Balance/In-balance

Many participants experienced great in-balance in terms of their immersive context and other facets of their lives. Most said whilst they were immersed other areas of their life were ignored, and they did not reach understanding and control until they had reinstated a more balanced lifestyle. It would seem that any immersive situation will entail a period of the situation becoming all-consuming, but it is important for this not to be sustained for the learning to occur. This is another expression of journey in immersive experiences. The person involved needs to journey from balance to in-balance, but to recognise the learning must continue until balance is regained. The motivation to regain balance drives the person to change or learn.

“Other parts of my life went neglected”

“sealed off from the outside world...re-emerges with a new awareness, bringing an additional layer of colour to their world view”

“But saturation...can lead to in-balances in life”

Support from others

A central sub-theme in most accounts was the role of others as offering support, guidance and in many cases a feeling that without others the participant would not have survived the experience. In some cases this was indirect support, where participants observed others, and were humbled, inspired or admired the resilience of others which led the participant to be determined to change in order to cope with the experience.

"My Uncle and Aunt were pillars of strength too. The strength, help and support I received from my family, my amazing family, was invaluable"

"I was blown back by his positive attitude. It gave me strength."

In other cases the supportive role of others was much more direct and explicit. Also, in many cases participants only gained objectivity and reflection, or new strategies, from engaging with other people, so support is emotional but also leads to change. It can be assumed that the role of other people in facilitating support, reflection and change in an individual immersed in an experience is incredibly important in the individual learning from the experience.

"She also told me that when something's wrong, you should put your energy into changing it, rather than letting it get you down"

"...and found myself greeted by a mentor"

"The only silver lining in these clouds of ambiguity was his Assistant"

"his perspective on life left me hungry"

"Mr Hawkes' question...triggered off a change in me...the mere fact that Mr.Hawkes was willing to teach it to me was enough encouragement...it showed he believed I was capable" "...Laura also taught me the most important things I will ever learn about life. Laura was 9 years old."

"I was able to evaluate and integrate different teachers styles to form a style of my very own"

Comparison

Making comparisons is a form of sense making and two sorts of comparing characterised many of the immersive experience accounts.

Comparison to others

A feature of many stories demonstrated participants' need to compare themselves to others. This was occasionally in a judgemental way, but in many instances this was in terms of self-deprecation.

"Who all seemed to be taking it in their stride"

"They would talk about their good relationships with their host families, and I envied them."

"Bianca was lovely...highlighted our differences."

In other instances, comparing themselves to how others in similar situations were coping motivated the participants to change or to persevere with the experience. This links strongly to the theme of support from others, in terms of this comparison leading to motivation to act or change demonstrates how other people were indirectly supportive, without knowing the impact they had.

"It was seeing the people around me that understood these things, who seemed much the same as me, that gave me hope"

"Observations I made...in which different teachers taught...left me with an extremely rich perspective".

Comparison to familiar

Immersive experiences are by their nature engaging with the unfamiliar to varying degrees. It seems an immersive experience has to contain unfamiliar features that need new learning or acceptance. Participants were compelled to compare unfamiliar things, for example behaviours, customs, cultures, feelings etc, to familiar ones. It seems this comparison is necessary for someone undergoing an immersive experience to help them understand it and to ground oneself and regain control by relating it to something familiar or trying to contextualise the unfamiliar into the familiar. This can also be an expression of the journey participants are making; from the familiar, to the unfamiliar until eventually even the unfamiliar experience becomes familiar.

"I could not help but compare the quality and the cost to English public transport"

"She had to learn to accept the differences between what she was working on now...and everything that had come before"

"After that, I thought, I'll never worry about a work or university presentation again"

"The experience made me appreciate how good my home country of Ireland is"

"I wanted things to be the way they were"

Loss of identity/role change

Many accounts of immersive experiences gave rise to a feeling of loss of identity and role change. This was sometimes very apparent through use of a uniform (*"where I changed into more suitable garb"*) or becoming a minority group, but also in terms of questioning oneself and beliefs, or through language barriers and going from a position of 'expert' to 'novice'.

"My identity as a student was no longer prominent in defining my contribution. I was an individual working in firm"
"My poor Spanish was constantly a barrier between what I was, and what I wanted to be"

Loss of identity leads to feelings of being overwhelmed or deskilled and results in strong negative emotions. But through the immersive experience a different identity emerges. This new identity reflects new learning and personal change, and the recognition of this identity is part of the feeling of transformation. Here is seen another journey, resulting in integration of the old and new roles and the creation of a more complex person or identity.

"returning to a world where I am surrounded by the paradox of everything yet nothing being the same"

"It would be for personal reasons, for self identification"

"While I was the mental health professional with little experience, they were all experts by experience...I also learned to position myself not as the expert, but as a facilitator"

Perspective change

Changing perspectives on the world is also a feature of many accounts of immersive experiences.

"I loved this piece and mastering one bar gave me so much satisfaction. I was keen and patient...always imagining the finishing result to block out the temptation of giving up when obstacles appeared".

In order to counteract the negative and to remove dissonance, participants changed perspective or re-evaluated the outlook of the situation.

"Despite the basic facilities, I came to like the Nile Beach Camp...Ignoring the stained concrete floor...I looked forward to my cold showers morning and evening"

This in some instances also worked to re-frame things in a more negative perspective.

"When at home...he enjoyed rains...this time he perceived rains to be something afflictive, distressing and calamitous"

"somehow everyday existence replaced excitement"

This cognitive reappraisal or perspective change often enables learning and change to take place in the person and to develop richer understanding of complex situations and better cognitive strategies for dealing with an immersive experience. Often this cognitive reappraisal moves thinking away from the negative ie what wasn't known or couldn't be done, to what had been accomplished and achieved.

"So it is, I thought, and then I started to reconsider my strategy"

"I realised I had been focussing purely on what was left to do, rather than taking stock of what I had been able to accomplish"

"The immersion I had been through changed my perception...it is not something to shy away from for fear of being overwhelmed"

"fresh perspectives being considered"

"Or to put a more positive spin on it, a year of extreme challenges and opportunities"

"Learning that the Xhosa of South Africa train people who hear voices to become healers suggested there could be positive explanations and responses to experiences that seem so far removed from Westernised medical conceptualisations"

"She also told me that when something's wrong, you should put your energy into changing it, rather than letting it get you down"

Paradox

Paradox creates dissonance which drives change and learning within the individual in order to reduce this dissonance. Some of the paradoxes noted in immersive experiences are listed below.

External vs internal presentation

Many participants expressed the pressure they felt between having to present themselves positively externally whilst internally feeling negative about themselves or the situation. Through the experience participants had to perceive themselves differently, as those externally saw them.

“feigning control till I believed it also”

“And suddenly I am not a short man but tall...my accent isn’t refined it’s awkward”

“and I didn’t tell them because I felt guilty that I wasn’t relishing every moment”

Small difference vs big challenge

Many participants, after re-evaluation and reflection, displayed the focus shift from making a big difference that was impossible due to the barriers, to a focus on making a small difference or working effectively in a small area. This shift in focus allows participants to gain control over the immersion and sustain themselves through the rest of the experience.

“I needed to stop worrying about what I was supposed to be doing, and just try to put as much of myself into what I was doing”

“you don’t have to go thousands of miles away to make a difference”

Expected/unexpected

Many accounts showed the difference in what people expected compared to what the realities were.

“He did not expect such grim and unpleasant news”

“These concerns proved to be unfounded”

“To want something so much and to then realise that is nothing like you expected was painfully difficult”

Participants often found the most valuable parts of the experience to be the parts they had not even considered previously, which participants became aware of through reflection after the experience. This suggests that the nature of the experience can only be appreciated and understood after time has been spent thinking about it.

“I was not ready for...”

“But looking back now, the most valuable things I learned were those I had not expected to”

“I discovered that I held assumptions I had not been conscious of”

Positive vs negative

Parts of the experiences were either described very positively or very negatively, and this polarisation is perhaps a necessary feature of an immersive experience. This strong feeling of extremes makes the experience memorable and probably is another drive for learning to occur. There was also paradox between positive and negative emotions emerging in many of the stories.

“Awash with excitement and fear”

“although I let the excitement and pride of the future achievement fill me in, a certain anxiety kept bugging me”

“I’ve never had so many consecutive emotional highs and lows”

Academic vs ‘real world’

Several student participants, through their immersive experience, became aware of the tension between academic, book/classroom based learning and practice-based learning. This seemed to begin as a tension in the stories, but then developed into a combining of the two, reducing the tension and improving the person’s coping abilities. Such stories acknowledged that the learning that occurred because of the experience was life-long learning, that was transferable to other, unrelated situations, but that also combined things that had been previously learnt. This demonstrates the nature of learning for life and the sort of experiences that can give rise to this type of learning.

“a skill academic research could not have aided me in...the interaction between my practical learning and my theoretical knowledge of psychology began to occur”

“his suggestions were more of a bookish nature, he thought. He felt that the proffers they came up with were more practical”

“He now practically knew that theory and practice were two separate entities, but not detached from each other”.

Learning – experiential knowing

Learning is an active process: people learn by doing and experiencing things

- *Learning by observing, experiencing, listening, participating, searching for information, asking. I started by wandering around in the clothes I arrived with, then I got an office on someone else's island, then bought my own land (and sold some), then took delivery of our own island which I prepared for the students, to carry out their activity last semester. I attended conferences and discussions, and then organised my own discussion series in the office and now on the island. I spent a lot of time shopping and opened my own shop. I found I was devoting rather a lot of time to living in Second Life ...*

In such situations people learn from the experiences of others

- *At the same time, learning from the experiences of others (such as my two French colleagues) was invaluable in helping me to understand this foreign landscape.*
- *structured reflection with my coach-mentor*
- *the opportunity to discuss issues – and crucially my reflection on issues*

Learning is experiential and reflective

- *The forms of learning were initially experiential; later, after the event, predominantly reflective.*

Learning involves seeing and making new meanings

- *for me the gain in experiential and reflective learning was much greater. In particular, I was struck by the final wonder..... this triggered a personal exploration of a situation in which I currently find myself. Through it I was able to explore a range of possibilities. The situation is still uncomfortable but I am now more at peace with the way things are working out.*

The learning that participants report raises the issue of what counts as learning: what emerges is a very rich and diverse visualisation and representation of what learning derived through these sorts of experiences means.

We learn a lot through experiences that we describe as being immersive. *Learning by observing, experiencing, listening, participating, searching for information, asking.*

- *[I learnt a] huge amount of a broad/general and subject specific knowledge acquisition happened as a result of this immersive experience.*

Situations often demand that we learn quickly and they may force us to make and learn from mistakes

- *I had to learn a lot very quickly, and learn by making mistakes as well*

We learn complex things – like a new language or how a society or culture works.

- *I learnt to speak fluently but at the same time, understood how difficult it is to be completely illiterate -- deaf and dumb in some ways of*
- *immersion enabled me to get inside another culture and I take pleasure from this experience even to this day. It has left an enduring mark, a language competence and a deep respect for Italy, particularly the South.*
- *I developed considerable verbal fluency in Russian, moving from an initial lack of confidence and reluctance to open my mouth for fear of making a mistake, to thinking (and sometimes dreaming) in Russian,*

- *I learnt that the British approach to life wasn't the only way, so I learnt how to unlearn. I figured out which parts of my Britishness I wanted to hold on to and which were better discarded. I found out what was really important to me and treasured values like kindness, cheerfulness and courage that go beyond culture.*

We learn subtle things

- *A recognition of the power of the smile and the importance of humour in negotiating and in tense situations.*

Situations encourage self-reliance and resourcefulness and encourage people to push themselves beyond their comfort zones

- *The situation, which was highly stressful at times, made me more self-reliant.*
- *It made me engage in huge amounts of a priori reasoning, reflection, planning and practice, in the absence of any prescribed, agreed approaches or even content.*
- *My own predispositions and interests were encouraged by the circumstances, so that these could be used as resources*
- *I discovered resources in myself of self-reliance, resilience and staying power, even through the difficult times.*
- *I soon discovered that ...I just needed to be self-reliant and get on with the job*
- *Shown me the importance of risk taking and moving out of one's comfort zone*

We learn physical things

- *dance movements that then become part of oneself; learning sections of choreography*

We learn complex skills and competencies

- *I learnt to gather and synthesise complex evidence and make judgements about what I had seen and experienced.*
- *An apparent capacity to appear patient and calm while inwardly panicking!*
- *I also developed skills for embracing differences.*
- *I learnt how to build relationships and when to choose not to.*

We encounter ah-ha moments:

- *'Not exactly eureka moments, more ah, hah moments as something falls into place, links with something else or I understand more about a situation or experience'*

We learn about how other people behave and become more sensitive to seeing the world from other perspectives

- *I learned how individuals construct their own changing perspectives in learning situations*
- *An understanding that some people just do not see the detail and that it takes hard conscious thought to work with people who have very different thought processes and working patterns when in an immersive situation.*
- *On reflection, changes that emerged include a greater respect for others who encounter challenges on a daily basis, particularly people who live in absolute poverty and suffer from terminal illnesses, yet do so in a dignified manner.*
- *I learnt to empathise with the front-line teachers and managers that made our education system work*

We learn to think with complexity, with deeper wisdom and new senses of knowing

- *Negotiation and decision-making based on whole-person, complex models of what learning is and what it is for*
- *An acknowledgement that there needs to be vision to create such events, and a realisation that even the smallest of details are important and need to be considered at the visionary stage in order for the big picture to appear complete*

We learn how to reflect more deeply and how to make sense of complex situations through this process.

- *This provided the impetus to appreciate reflection as a practitioner far more constructively than hitherto - and within that to recognise the importance of both peer feedback and an understanding of peer perspectives.*

- *It made me reflect on my own skills, attitudes and highlighted my strengths.*

We learn how to create new senses of order

- *Sense-making is an ongoing project*
- *A feeling of creating order, making sense out of material that was both very familiar to me but which seemed at the outset to be very fragmented.*

We learn to see things differently through the forms or learning and the personal meaning and connections we make in our lives

- *for me the gain in experiential and reflective learning was much greater. In particular, I was struck by the final wonder: "I wonder what God was doing while Abram & Sarai were wandering back and forth in the desert?" this triggered a personal exploration of a situation in which I currently find myself. Through it I was able to explore a range of possibilities. The situation is still uncomfortable but I am now more at peace with the way things are working out.*
- *the learning was about being reminded how teaching and facilitating a learning experience can actually be a trigger for one's own learning - and for the reassertion of one's own learned experiences.*

We learn to work with, use and control our emotions

We develop our contextual awareness. Many of the accounts demonstrate that participants achieve greater contextual awareness through comparing what they experienced to the wider context. In some instances this was in relation to the environment or culture. "*Perhaps it's the deep-seated reverence for samurai culture...or some sense of alienation after the World Wars...Whatever the social fuel...*". For others this was the contextual awareness of their emotions, their learning or their ability to transfer skills. "*I have most certainly adapted it to many different aspects of life*"; "*Learning to learn from them was crucial...I hope will serve me well throughout my career*".

Personal change

Change is an essential outcome of an immersive experience and the magnitude and nature of the change is what makes the experience feel transformative. These changes were driven by the necessity to survive the situation. The amount and quality of change recognised reflects the nature of the immersive experience that is described.

Some people moved away from their preferred way of doing things

- *The insight provided by my mentor threw a lot of light for me on how much of an effort I had made to move away from natural inclinations to adapt to individual coaching situations*

In some situations people are forced to radically change their behaviour

- *To adapt to the school, I needed to take a crash course in understanding what it was like to be different. I wore an army coat and converse tennis shoes as an urban uniform. I listened to radio programmes and television that were popular to the African-American community, i.e. Soul Train; much of the vernacular and spoken word were different to me. I to alter the way I behaved: I learned to adopt an unprovocative demeanour and not look up into people's eyes because this was seen as aggressive. I tried to find friends to advise me on protocol; several friends were half African-American and half Indian and were also considered different by their classmates*

People changed their value systems and became more humble

- *It made me value what I did for a job. It taught me to value difference and helped me become less judgemental.*
- *I became (I hope!) less arrogant and more tolerant.*
- *I felt humbled through the experience of meeting and observing the many professionals I came into contact with.*

People become more self-aware and gain confidence in their own capability often through the support of others and reflection leading to recognition of one's ability. This is another dimension of the personal journey embedded in an immersive experience.

- *I felt more self-aware and confident to act in a facilitative fashion both with coachees and colleagues....In work relationships in particular I have come to observe I had been operating in a very reactive and process-, rather than, self-aware, interactive and people-focussed way for a long time.*
- *Confidence in my ability to be accepted as a colleague in a hitherto closed world to me*
- *The main change was the eventual growth in confidence to stick with speaking German especially at work. Overall I think that this whole experience made me much more confident and able to tackle new situations.*
- *Boosted my self confidence*
- *The uncertainty of ever getting through it has been replaced with determination and a trust in my ability*
- *no longer held back by the thought that my lack of work experience...would detract from my ability to make worthwhile contributions*
- *You just trust that you will manage, that you will succeed, that you will achieve...in confidence*
- *this gave me the confidence*
- *I started feeling confident and comfortable in the classroom*

They gain new intellectual and practical tools

- *The experience, not that I knew it at the time, helped equip me with the intellectual and practical tools and knowledge to move on to further challenges*

Immersive experiences develop persistence and self-knowledge about what an individual can achieve

- *Although there were times when I thought I would go under I didn't. I persisted and with that persistence and my accumulated experiences my confidence grew so that at the end of the process the thought of radical change didn't frighten me any more.*
- *Deeper understanding of working with tiredness, endurance: language skills diminish, body can be pushed, working through frustration and difficulty to achieve what perhaps did not feel possible at first.*
- *Important to try different strategies to achieve your goals and be proactive - 'If they don't answer your second email knock on their door'.*
- *I discovered resources in myself of self-reliance, resilience and staying power, even through the difficult times.*
- *finally I acquired enough resilience to not run away again.*

People gain new insights on complex lives and these insights may well connect with or change a person's identity

- *It made links to what I already knew in a non threatening safe environment. It made me value what I did for a job. It taught me to value difference and helped me become less judgemental. I found that we all had a shared ethos and although we worked in a variety of fields we all wanted the same thing. It made me reflect on my own skills, attitudes and highlighted my strengths. It taught me not to be scared of words. It showed me what child/person centred really means.*
- *I learned and continue to learn that what is important is learning, not teaching. I learned and continue to learn that there is an emotional aspect to learning as well as an intellectual one. I became (I hope!) less arrogant and more tolerant.*
- *I changed from being a lone, angry rebel to realising that sustaining negativity is a waste of effort and time and that this was better spent finding connections and commonality. I found that shared feelings and experiences were a better basis for establishing lasting common ground than shared opinions. I learnt how to build relationships and when to choose not to.*

At the transformative end of the learning continuum immersive experiences fundamentally change people

- *It's fair to say that this immersive experience was life-changing; I became aware that I could learn anything I set my mind to, taking ownership gradually of a level of confidence that I had never before experienced and that – yes, I can say, permanently – changed my attitude to learning and therefore to myself. I still feel a sense of celebration!*
- *I discovered all my limitations as a person, as a Muslim, and as a friend. It was almost like rediscovering me from inside out.*
- *It gave me confidence and in practical terms it gave me the way forward through new skills and knowledge. Ultimately it gave me the impetus to change jobs and move into Further and then Higher Education.*
- *I changed from being a novice with no idea what I was supposed to do to someone who could perform the professional role. I reformed my professional identity during that year and became a very different person in terms of my interests*
- *Overall this was a transforming experience on many levels. As well as learning about a very different world from the one I had grown up in, I also developed personally, gaining in confidence and resilience, and possibly shedding some naivety along the way.*
- *We all recognised, both at the time and in retrospect, that some profound changes had occurred that made a substantial and sustained difference to our understanding of the nature of the 'professional task' and of the need to work 'alongside', rather than 'for' our clients if we were to understand their plight and add value to their life experiences and/or ameliorate their suffering.*
- *I am not the same person as I would have been had I gone to a suburban all 'white' school.*

The will to be immersed

Understanding what compels people to voluntarily enter an experience that is likely to be immersive or to turn an experience into one that is immersive by engaging in it in an immersive way is important if we are to create conditions for immersive experience in higher education. It might be anticipated that committing to a level of engagement that participants recognise as being immersive will require powerful motivational forces particularly if the experience is sustained over a period of time. The stories participants chose to tell of their immersive experiences were overwhelmingly self-motivated and positive in the sense of fulfilling personal needs, desires and aspirations. In a few stories the reasons for participating in an immersive way were not clear.

Some of the more overt sources of motivation are listed below.

- Need / desire for personal development / profound change.
- Taking on a significant new challenge requiring adaptation/re-invention – motivations to understand/survive/master.
- Necessity /need to invent (typically connected to taking on a new/significant challenge)
- Desire to exploit an opportunity (typically connected to taking on a new challenge)
- Desire to learn a language/culture (specific and frequently cited new challenge)
- Desire to gain professional experience in another culture
- The need for stimulation (generic reason for a new challenge)
- Necessity /need to invent (typically connected to taking on a new/significant challenge)
- Need desire to conduct research (specific context for new challenge)
- Passion/excitement/happiness
- Experiencing effects
- Doing something for others
- Being inspired by others
- Modelling immersive behaviour in order to engage others in an immersive way
- Coping with situations that were imposed / outside of the control of the individual

Strong and sustained self-motivational forces are likely to involve a combination of forces like for example the need desire for change/personal development, might be connected to taking on a new challenge, seeing and exploiting a new opportunity then experiencing the effects on self and others.

We must also appreciate that an overt motivational force may camouflage other motivations which although unspoken might be as powerful. So needs and desire for change/personal development might also be connected deep down to unarticulated desires for a happier, more fulfilling or spiritual life.

Motivations are also likely to change through a complex experience. An immersive experience may begin with an obligation or sense of duty, it might encounter anxiety and fear as a source of negative emotional energy but might progress through senses of satisfaction and enjoyment as difficult situations are mastered and new insights are gained.

Only a few immersive experiences appear to have been 'driven' by circumstances beyond the control of the individual, although the environment and participants' engagement with it is a key feature of most immersive experiences.

In summary, the overwhelming sources of energy and commitment to engaging in an immersive way with a complex situation seem to be intrinsic in nature seemingly triggered by needs for new experiences and challenges through which people develop themselves. Maslow (1943) developed a framework for analysing the motivational forces behind human behaviour and growth. His model contains five levels of need.

1. Biological and Physiological basic needs - air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep, etc.
2. Safety needs - protection from elements, security, order, law, limits, stability, etc.
3. Belongingness and Love needs - work group, family, affection, relationships, etc.
4. Esteem needs - self-esteem, achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, managerial responsibility, etc.
5. Self-Actualization needs - realising personal potential, self-fulfilment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.

Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* has been extended by other people to include ('Cognitive', 'Aesthetic', and 'Transcendence' – helping others achieve self-actualization) 'levels'. Others have argued that these sources of motivation are all concerned with self-development and self-fulfilment that is rooted in self-actualization 'personal growth', which is distinctly different to the 1-4 level 'deficiency' motivators. Maslow's hierarchical and sequential model has been criticised because in real life people tend to access and utilise different levels of motivation simultaneously rather than sequentially. Clayton Alderfer combined Maslow's five categories into three categories in his ERG theory:

Table 1 Clayton Alderfer's Existence-Relatedness-Growth ERG theory

Growth	An intrinsic desire for personal development. These include the Maslow's intrinsic esteem category and the characteristics included under self-actualization.
Relatedness	The desire we have for maintaining important interpersonal relationships. These social status desires require interaction with others. They align with Maslow's social need and external component.
Existence	Provides our basic material existence requirements. They include Maslow's physiologic safety needs.

In contrast to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the ERG theory demonstrates that (1) more than one need may be operative at the same time ie needs are not satisfied sequentially and (2) if the gratification of a higher-level need is stifled, the desire to satisfy a lower-level need increases.

This simpler and more flexible interpretive framework seems to work quite well for characterising the motivational forces that are associated with immersive experiences (represented in participants' stories). Overwhelmingly, the motivations for engaging in immersive experiences seem to be associated with Growth – the personal development, intrinsic self-esteem / self-actualising dimensions of the framework. It would appear that engaging in an experience in an immersive way is a means of satisfying an individuals needs for self-actualisation.

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