

Learning for a Complex World

A lifewide concept of learning,
education and personal development

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Chapter 10

Immersive experience: a rich but challenging environment for transformative learning

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Synopsis

This Chapter considers the role of immersion in student development. Stories of immersive experiences were analysed to draw out the characteristics of the experiences and the perceptions of learning and development that emerged through such experiences. The most significant theme in stories of immersive experiences is a sense of journey and transition: it underpins the sense of transformational change that is often associated with immersive experience. Our claim is that immersive experiences provide rich environments for developing a range of self-knowledge, understandings, dispositions, qualities and capabilities that are essential for current and future survival and adaptation in a complex, unpredictable and often disruptive world. A lifewide concept of learning and education could embrace the immersive experiences learners encounter in their lives, and facilitate and recognise the learning and personal development they gain through such experiences.

Introduction

Chapter 6 set out a number of principles for the design of a curriculum that would better prepare learners for the uncompromising complexities of the world ahead of them. All are relevant to this chapter but propositions 3 and 4 are particularly relevant and have in part been formed in response to the studies that are reported in this Chapter.

Proposition 3: prepares learners for and gives them experiences of adventuring in uncertain and unfamiliar situations where the contexts and challenges are not known, accepting the risks involved

Proposition 4: supports learners when they participate in situations that require them to be resilient and enables them to appreciate their own transformation

This Chapter considers the idea of immersive experiences. *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, resilience and capabilities that lead to adaptation or even reinvention of self. The willingness and ability to transform self is increasingly necessary in order to survive the messiness of life. It is in these situations that we need to draw on all our intellectual, practical and creative resourcefulness. Consequently this is where we might usefully explore possible links with Cszenstmihayli's concept of 'Flow' (Cszenstmihayli 1997) which emerges through from holistic and intense engagement with a significant challenge. and where our dispositions, qualities and capabilities are able to match the challenge.

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 and development from such experiences.

There are considerable ethical issues relating to putting students into physically and emotionally challenging situations, but students intentionally or unintentionally encounter such situations in their lives outside the classroom. Rather than ignore this fact, higher education could support and help learners develop their understanding of how they change through such experiences. In this context the notion of 'enabling' is one of recognising that although such situations are difficult and stressful, they are part of life. They are often the source of profound insight and personal change: change that better prepares people for similar situations and challenges in the future. By considering and validating such learning, higher education can enhance the ability of learners to

recognise their own transformative learning and the process of becoming different.

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 one of their experiences which they believed engaged them in an immersive way (an immersive experience). Forty-three stories were donated.¹

Participants were invited to describe:

- 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 they would use to describe the experience
- the principles or lessons that they could draw from the story; for example, how this story could inform designs and enrich opportunities for learning through immersive experience in higher education.

The second study involved an analysis of twenty-six stories of immersive experiences submitted by students to an essay competition in January 2008. The invitation contained a series of prompts but these were intended to stimulate not constrain personal narratives. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith 1996) was used to identify emerging themes. The final stage of analysis 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 (Figure 10.1 wordle cloud) is rich and reflects the complexity of the experiences and the emotional effects on participants. The following list outlines the situations and the words and phrases that encapsulate these experiences:

- *Situations that require an intense level of engagement, concentration and effort* – words like absorbing, challenge, consuming, determination, discipline, driven, engagement, energetic, immersed, intense and intensive, perseverance, powerful, relentless, self-motivation, self-

- *Situations that are extremely challenging, sometimes difficult to describe in ways that capture the complexity, in which risk and anxiety are often associated* – words like alarming, all-encompassing, anxiety, challenging (frequently used), competing interests, complex and 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.
- *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, 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* – words like '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, invention.
- *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 well-being* – words like celebratory, confidence boosting, empowering, happiness, rewarding, satisfaction, satisfying, pride.

Contexts for immersive experiences

Contexts identified in personal stories of immersive experiences include:

- *Challenging 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 by issues like poverty or poor security; for example, 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 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 storytellers 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 in a new organisation with little relevant experience, or they chose to engage in particular work, education, self-study or leisure activities that they found challenging.

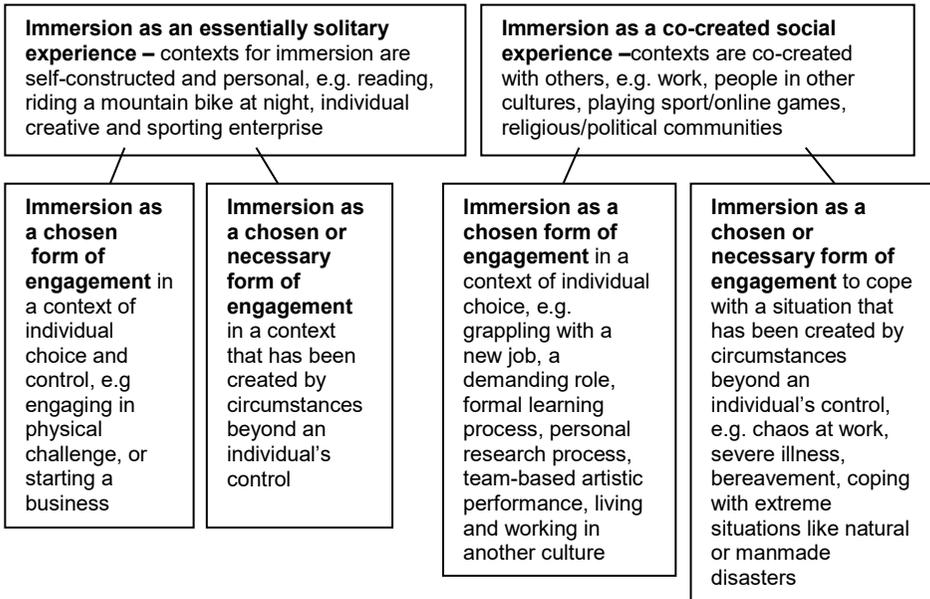
In some cases storytellers made a familiar place unfamiliar in order to enhance the challenge of the experience – like the story of off-road cycling at night. Here a familiar environment was rendered unfamiliar by the loss of sensory information as a result of riding a bicycle off-road in the dark. The experience involved increased risk of accident but created feelings of excitement and demanded heightened use of senses and off-road cycling skill.

Most of the stories are positive and affirming in the sense that even when the experience was uncomfortable good things generally emerged. However, we also have to recognise that there are circumstances for immersive experience from which good things will not emerge. We must also acknowledge there will be situations where people find themselves immersed in something for reasons beyond their control, i.e. 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, such as bereavement.

Based on the stories of immersive experiences we can define two sorts of overarching contexts (Figure 10.2). Many experiences are likely to contain a mix of solitary and social activity and also circumstances that involve both individual choice and external circumstances beyond an individual's control.

Figure 10.2 Contexts for immersive experience



The first category embraces those experiences where immersion is essentially a solitary enterprise (i.e. individuals create the experience through their thinking and actions and do 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 and playing video games on a computer are all examples of such experiences. We might envisage two situations for immersive solitary enterprise:

- where an individual constructs the environment and conditions for immersive experience – for example, climbing a mountain
- where circumstances require an immersive response from an individual – for example, having to endure and survive a hostile environment if the weather deteriorates badly.

Using the conceptual frame of Stephenson (1998) and Figure 4.1 (Chapter 4), participants have moved from familiar contexts and challenges into unfamiliar settings and challenges. These are often transitional situations; for example, when a student moves from home and school to university, or when someone begins a new job.

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:

- where individuals place themselves in a challenging social situation and choose to engage in an immersive way – examples might include grappling with a new job or complex work problem, engaging deeply in artistic performance, prolonged travel or exposure in another country/culture with a partner
- where rapid and significant changes in circumstances or the environment require an immersive response in order to get through or survive an event – examples of situations might include severe illness within the family, bereavement and coping with natural or manmade disasters.

Types of immersive experience

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

- Experiences that are essentially pleasurable and risk free and do not encounter conditions that are stressful or distressing – like being immersed in a book.
- Experiences that may contain within them pleasurable experiences and outcomes but that also contain physically, intellectually and emotionally challenging, stressful or distressing situations.
- 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.
- 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. However, positives can be taken from the transformation and surviving that occurs in these experiences, most likely following a period of time and then reflection.

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 involve participation in an environment unfamiliar to the learner
- learners allowing themselves to be fully part of the experience : 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 one's wider repertoire of knowledge and skill.

All these things were reflected in the accounts of immersive experiences but the most striking feature is that, despite the huge variety in situations described, there are many similarities in the underlying themes, emotions, changes and experiences of the participants. Appendix 1 presents the themes identified in student accounts, with explanation and supporting quotations. Three overarching themes were identified: the experience, the individual and facilitating factors in transformation.

The experience

This overarching theme encapsulates the immersive experience, as experienced by people writing their stories.

- *Sense of journey* – this is the predominant theme of the stories, demonstrating the type of process of personal development that occurs during an immersive experience. As it is integral to immersive experience, this theme is elaborated in more detail later in the chapter.
- *Emotions* – there is a strong emotional dimension to immersive experiences, and it appears that these emotions are a significant factor in the motivation of an individual to change and a guiding influence throughout the process. This is explained in more detail later in the chapter.
- *Paradox* – external versus internal; small difference versus big challenge; expected versus unexpected; positive versus negative; academic versus real world. This theme captures the contradictions experienced in the stories. It is clear that immersive experience involves juxtaposition in various ways. Dissonance occurs from what is portrayed externally and what is felt internally. Expectations of the experience beforehand are usually not met, and it is the unexpected/unforeseen parts of the experience that bring challenges and change. Experiences swing between extremes of very positive and very negative, and can also be both at the same time. Also, a strong feature in some stories

was the initial shock of the gap between academia and the real world in various ways. This was reconciled by bringing the two together in the end period of mastery.

The individual

This second overarching theme captures what happens to the individuals who engage in immersive experiences and the important changes (transformations) that individuals undergo during the experience.

- *Choice* – choice was important in most stories, where people elected to enter the situation. But the experience was often not what was expected. However, the choice to remain in the difficult situation emerged, as participants chose to learn new strategies and skills to cope with and master a situation. This demonstrates the influence of the freedom to choose or the will to persist.
- *Loss of identity/role change* – there was a clear sense of loss of self, characterised by uncertainty and loss of confidence. What emerged from this was a partial loss of identity and the emergence of a new sense of self, made up from integrating old parts with new parts. This is described in more detail later in the chapter.
- *Perspective change* – this demonstrates how dissonance arises in coping with unfamiliar and uncertain situations, and how negative feelings arise, giving a sense of being overwhelmed. Cognitive reappraisal, or perspective change, reduces dissonance and helps the individual re-evaluate the situation and see it more positively, therefore making it more manageable. Other people are often instrumental in this perspective change.

Facilitating factors in transformation

The third overarching theme identifies some of the factors that influence the process and representation of transformation.

- *Support from others* – the supportive role of others in experiences is important, partly to alleviate loneliness, but also as a way to make sense of experiences, provide other perspectives, help individuals understand their emotions and regain balance. This support was sometimes direct and in other instances was indirect. This is described in more detail later in the chapter.
- *Comparison* – comparisons emerged in the stories, both comparison to others and comparing the unfamiliar to the familiar. Comparison to others was usually self-deprecating, perceiving others as coping when storytellers were not. This sometimes helped to motivate them to

change. Comparing the unfamiliar to familiar emerged perhaps as a way to understand and contextualise the sudden unfamiliarity in which people found themselves.

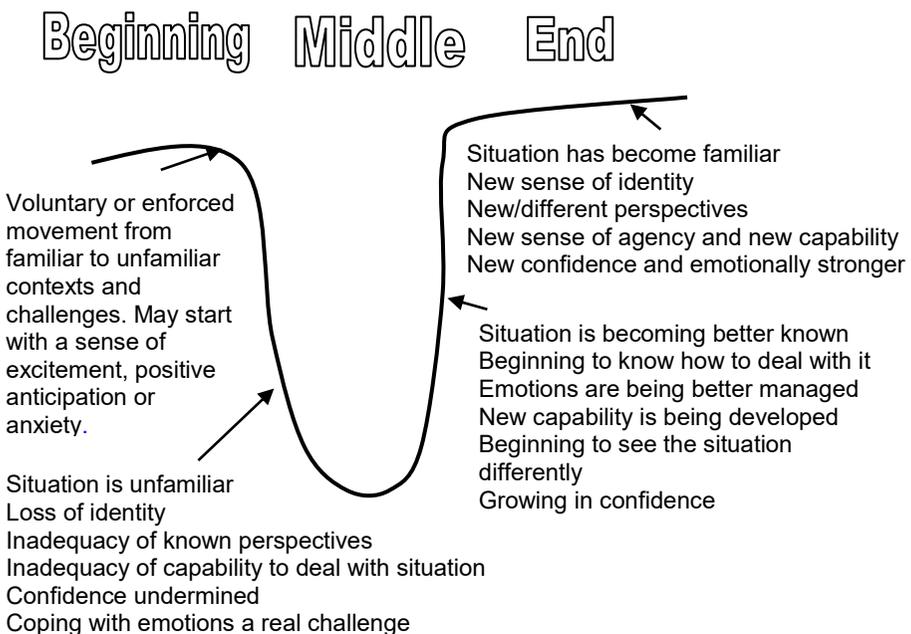
- *Presentation of situation* – some stories seemingly justified the challenging nature of the situation by presenting the situation as exceptional. This may also have been a way to validate their feelings and difficulties, rather than doubting their abilities; this instead acknowledged their struggle as valid due to the challenging nature of the situation.

Sense of journey

The most common and significant theme in stories of immersive experiences is a sense of journey. This journey underpins the sense of transformational change that is often associated with immersive experience.

An individual's journey often begins with anticipation, which gives way to feelings of being overwhelmed and ends with a sense of mastering or coming to terms with a situation. This pattern is depicted in Figure 10.3.

Figure 10.3 The transformative journey depicted in many stories of immersive experience



In the initial part of the experience most accounts exhibited a sense of excitement and positive expectations or anxiety if the situation was not of their making. During the middle stage of an immersive experience participants felt overwhelmed and questioned the choices they had made and that were available to them, and their involvement in the experience. During the final stage of the experience participants accepted and embraced 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.

Another feature of this staged process is the emotional journey participants make. Typically, the journey began with positive feelings (bearing in mind that most participants had voluntarily put themselves into situations which they found immersive). But as the experience unfolds even those who started with positive emotional states progressed into more negative states. The final stage is always characterised by deep positivity – significantly more positive than at any point in the experience as a result of surviving or mastering the situation.

Coping strategies are another feature of the process. 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 and lost confidence in their own capability to do so. '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, during which participants developed strategies, awareness and new capabilities. They developed a sense that they had mastered or gained enough experience and changed sufficiently to feel a sense of control. 'So here I was now, suddenly able.'

Many participants experienced a lack of balance in terms of their immersive context and other facets of their lives, which is not conducive to well-being. Most said while 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 with negative consequences for the rest of a person's life. 'But saturation ... can lead to imbalances in life.' Clearly, from a personal (and perhaps social) well-being perspective it is important for this situation not to be sustained. This is another expression of journey in immersive

experiences. The person involved needs to journey from balance to imbalance, but to recognise the learning the person must continue until balance is regained. The motivation to regain balance drives the person to change or learn or to get out of the situation he is in.

The sense of personal change and fulfilment that people gain through an 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 totally unfamiliar situations (often both contexts and challenges), growing into new and stronger confidence and new capability.

Emotional journey

Many emotions were expressed in personal accounts of immersive experience, including fear, happiness, excitement, guilt, anxiety, fear, shame and unhappiness. What is apparent is that during an immersive experience, very strong, and sometimes overwhelming, emotions are encountered. These strong emotions, in many cases, compelled participants to change or to re-evaluate themselves and their behaviours, either to attain or maintain a positive emotional state.

Emotions play a very important and prominent role in an immersive experience, and it is this experience of coping with and learning to manage emotions that makes the experience so valuable and memorable. Any experience that elicits a strong emotional response makes it very personal and motivates the person to engage with the situation no matter how difficult the challenge. Emotions seem to serve the role of motivating a person to change and to persist in difficult circumstances; although perhaps there must be occasions where they overwhelm the person to the point where they cannot deal with the situation. In many stories participants have to suppress or control their 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, 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 precursor to the participant gaining control over the situation as a whole. This emotional suppression/control is the internal indication to the person that he needs to change in some way to cope with the situation, to 'rebalance' the strong emotions, so the emotions become a signal and then a motivation for change. 'What kept me persevering was my passion.'

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. In general, participants became more expert in handling their emotions as a result of the experience and developed capabilities for coping with and managing strong emotions in the future. 'I've learnt to cry, to feel pain ... it's essential to talk to people about them.'

Loss of identity/role change

Many accounts of immersive experiences gave rise to a feeling of loss of identity and role change: 'My identity as a student was no longer prominent in defining my contribution. I was an individual working in a firm.' Identity change was also manifest in the desire to become a different sort of person: 'My poor Spanish was constantly a barrier between what I was, and what I wanted to be.'

Loss of identity often led to feelings of being overwhelmed or under-skilled and resulted 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 that this new identity is part of the feeling of transformation. Here is 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'.

Support from others

A central sub-theme in most accounts was the role of others in offering support and 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 by, inspired by or admired the resilience of others, which encouraged them 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. In many cases participants only gained objectivity and reflective learning, or new strategies, from engaging with other people. The role of other people in facilitating support, reflection and change in an individual immersed in an experience is very important in the individual learning from that experience, as is evidenced from these quotes.

- ‘She also told me that when something’s wrong, you should put your energy into changing it, rather than letting it get you down.’
- ‘His perspective on life left me hungry.’
- ‘[His] question ... triggered off a change in me ... the mere fact that [he] was willing to teach it to me was enough encouragement ... it showed he believed I was capable.’
- ‘[She] also taught me the most important things I will ever learn about life. [She] was 9 years old.’
- ‘She also told me that when something’s wrong, you should put your energy into changing it, rather than letting it get you down.’

Nature of learning

The observations outlined previously begin to reveal the rich nature of learning and development that emerges through an immersive experience. It involves the recognition that:

- *Learning is an active experiential process.* People learn by doing and experiencing things. Personal knowledge grows through the experience and by interacting with others: ‘learning from the experiences of others (such as my two French colleagues) was invaluable in helping me to understand this foreign landscape.’
- *Learning involves seeing and making new meanings.* Reflection is an important part of this process: ‘learning was initially experiential; later, after the event, predominantly reflective.’ ‘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 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. ‘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.’ ‘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.' '[It has] shown me the importance of risk taking and moving out of one's comfort zone.'
- *We learn physical things and complex skills and competencies.* '... dance movements that then become part of oneself; learning sections of choreography.' 'I learnt to gather and synthesise complex evidence and make judgements about what I had seen and experienced.' 'I also developed skills for embracing differences.' 'I learnt how to build relationships and when to choose not to.'
- *We encounter and recognise 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.' '[I have] 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.* ‘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.’
- *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 of learning, personal meaning and the new connections we make in our lives.* ‘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 develop our contextual awareness.* Many of the accounts demonstrate that participants achieve greater understanding of context by 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 [it] serve me well throughout my career.’

Recognition of personal change

Personal change is often an 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 and to make the most of the opportunities it held. 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.* '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: much of the vernacular and spoken word were [sic] different to me. I [had] 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 humbler.* '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.'
- *People became more self-aware and gained confidence in their own capabilities.* This was often through the support of others and reflection on what they achieved leading to deeper recognition of their own abilities. 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 coaches and colleagues ...' '... 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.' 'The uncertainty of ever getting through it has been replaced with determination and a trust in my ability.' 'You just trust that you will manage, that you will succeed, that you will achieve ... in confidence.' 'This gave me the confidence.'
- *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.' 'I discovered resources in myself of self-reliance, resilience and staying power, even through the difficult times.' '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 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 discovered all my limitations as a person, as a Muslim, and as a friend. It was almost like rediscovering me from inside out.' '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.' '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 included:

- need/desire for personal development / profound change
- taking on a significant new challenge requiring adaptation/reinvention – 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)
- spiritual desire
- desire to gain professional experience in another culture
- need for stimulation and desire for new experiences
- desire to experience effects
- 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 – doing something for self
- 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 evolving forces. For example, the need or desire for personal development might be connected to taking on a new challenge or exploiting a new opportunity, then having experienced the effects on self and others, the desire continues to build on what has been learnt and applied.

We must also appreciate that an overt motivational force may camouflage other motivations which, although unspoken, might be just as powerful. So need 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 during 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 the environment are key features of most immersive experiences.

Discussion

The immersive experiences described by the participants in these studies clearly engage them in a journey of self-discovery, often brought about by their participation in unfamiliar challenges in unfamiliar contexts (see Chapter 4). Such experiences seem to involve people in a holistic way, physically, cognitively and emotionally. The holistic model of learning and development described in Chapter 3 would appear highly relevant to these sorts of experiences. Through these experiences participants change in ways that they recognise as being substantial and significant. They come to know themselves in deeper more appreciative ways and they are able to transit from one identity to another as they become a different person. We conclude this chapter with a discussion of other research and theories that appear to be relevant to interpreting the learning and personal development gained through an immersive experience.

Making a transition necessitates deep structural change either by changing internally, and or changing the environment. Situations that require us to make a transition create the need for change, but we must choose to break the existing ways of being to create a new way of being (Gerswick 1991). A lot of transition research is focused on life-span milestones, such as school to work, or transition to parenthood (Landmark *et al.* 2010; Motulsky 2010). What this immersive experience work demonstrates is that there are many transitional situations that can provide the source for revolutionary change. This highlights value of a lifewide concept of education as learners could be encouraged to understand their transitions in a way that would help them prepare for some of the bigger transitions many will have to make later in life.

Transitions involve inter-dependent processes of identity change and repositioning, skills development/learning and the role of strong emotions for meaning making and elaboration (Hale and de Abreu 2010). The ability to understand, make sense of and manage your own and others' emotions is termed emotional intelligence, and it appears transitional processes require

these emotional self-management skills (Goleman 1995; Mayer *et al.* 2004, 2008). The motivation and agency of the individual is vital to the change process and for transformation to occur.

In the US large investment was made into developing transition programmes for those with disabilities to improve long-term prospects. The aim was to understand and therefore provide supportive practices that would enable successful transition into new situations such as work and higher education. Landmark *et al.* (2010) review empirical findings to evaluate the practices. These programmes involved fostering self-determination to ensure the individual is the agent of his own life. In particular they helped improve decision-making, problem-solving, goal-setting, risk-taking, self-awareness, evaluation and reflection skills. This is best theorised by self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000) where intrinsic motivation leads to individuals being highly motivated to learn, to change and to be active and engaged, eventually resulting in fulfillment and well-being. The key innate components of fostering this intrinsic motivation are competency, autonomy and relatedness (belonging) – all of which can be recognised in participants' stories of immersive experience.

Transitions involve identity change and repositioning (Hale and de Abreu 2010). Changes in identity are influenced by many factors, but past history is important and the new identity that emerges through a transition assimilates new elements with old elements. Manzi *et al.* (2010) suggest that new situational and role demands lead to changes in self-concept as new demands require an assimilation of the old and the new (Li *et al.* 2010; Beard and Wilson 2006). Hale and de Abreu (2010) support a view of process-orientation in adaptation rather than developing to end-states. Individuals cope with the transition ('rupture') by utilising different resources created from their cognitive, emotional and physical capacities. Knowledge of coping with previous transition experiences helps because these knowledge assets can be generalised, internalised and applied to the new transitional situation. Self-determination is important for not giving up and progressing through the transition in order to attain personal goals.

The assimilation of new and old components into a new structure, if integrated and made concrete, perhaps through supportive others, ensures congruence which determines emotional well-being and therefore emotional adjustment following transition (Williams 1999).

Positive or negative adjustment following the transition is proposed to be determined by the change process itself; how it was experienced, managed and encouraged (Williams 1999). Transitions may be negative and harmful as well as positive. Gersick (1991) suggests that evolution (or revolution) is not always improvement. Coping with the change process is important for an individual's emotional well-being and self-esteem. With appropriate support such experiences can be a very enhancing. Other people provide vital emotional support to enable people to progress through the transformation (Hale and Abreu, 2010) and ensure the change is enduring. Relational theory (Motulsky 2010) explains the importance of others in providing the type and quality of the relationship that will facilitate a transition, as was observed in our own study.

A lot of research has explored transitions. Much of it is quite specific in terms of situation such as career change, organisation change, school to work/higher education, university to work, transition to parenthood, transition in special education arenas (Landmark *et al.* 2010) and cultural change (Hale and de Abreu 2010; Ng *et al.* 2009). However, it appears that capability development in coping with and managing transition processes are common across situations (Gersick 1991). Transitional processes enable new capabilities to emerge, that can then be generalised and transferred to other areas of work and life (Ng *et al.* 2009). This conclusion is central to our interest in immersive experiences as a rich environment for learning and personal development. The research suggests that the confidence, insights, dispositions and capabilities that emerge through such experiences can be drawn on in future situations. This is an important conclusion and one that highlights the value of these forms of lifewide learning experience.

The conclusion we draw from our own study is that the overwhelming sources of energy, enthusiasm and commitment to engaging in an immersive way with a complex situation seem to be intrinsic in nature. They seem to be triggered by needs and desires for new experiences and challenges through which people can appreciate and develop themselves. Maslow (1943) developed a framework for analysing the motivational forces behind human behaviour and growth. His model contains five levels of need:

- biological and physiological basic needs – air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep, etc.
- safety needs – protection from elements, security, order, law, limits, stability, etc.
- belongingness and love needs – work group, family, affection, relationships, etc.

- esteem needs – self-esteem, achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, managerial responsibility, etc.
- self-actualisation needs – realising personal potential, self-fulfilment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.

Table 10.1 Existence-Relatedness-Growth (ERG) theory (Alderfer, 1980)

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

Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* has been extended by other people to include ‘levels’ (‘Cognitive’, ‘Aesthetic’ and ‘Transcendence’ – helping others achieve self-actualisation). Others have argued that these sources of motivation are all concerned with self-development and self-fulfilment that is rooted in self-actualisation ‘personal growth’, which is distinctly different to the 1 to 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. To address this criticism Alderfer (1980) combined Maslow’s five categories into three categories in his Existence-Relatedness-Growth (ERG) theory (Table 10.1).

In contrast to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory, the ERG theory demonstrates that:

- more than one need may be operative at the same time; that is, needs are not satisfied sequentially
- 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 participants’ stories of immersive experiences. The motivations for engaging in immersive experiences seem to be overwhelmingly 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 individual's needs and desires for personal development – for becoming the person he wants to become.

This links strongly to self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000). SDT proposes that people have an innate psychological need for autonomy, relatedness and competence, and these influence (through satisfaction of these needs) individuals' intrinsic goal focus and motivation, and determine their sense of well-being. Individual agency, motivation to learn and novel skill mastery are all outcomes of satisfying these needs. Development and self-regulation are important factors. These three needs are proposed as essential to fulfill the human desire for growth and integration. Motivation leads to creativity; therefore, it is important to understand intrinsic motivation as a concept. Intrinsic motivation emerged in participants' narratives in some cases, to deal with an unknown situation, but more generally the motivation to continue in spite of the challenges and difficulties experienced in the immersive experience. Motivation can be authentic, and self-derived, or it can be externally imposed. External imposition is less likely to foster motivation, unless an individual can incorporate the value of this situation into his long-term goal structure. Interest, confidence and excitement arises from authentic, self-derived situations, although our participants still struggled with the unexpected difficulty of experiences they had chosen to enter. However, because they were able to choose this created their sense of autonomy and the motivation that enabled them to continue towards relatedness and mastery. Self-determination is important for persisting through a transition in order to attain personal goals (Hale and Abreu 2010) and our participants demonstrated this in their stories.

Within SDT, cognitive evaluation theory (CET) (Dec and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Dec 2000) suggests that socio-contextual events, such as reward and feedback, enhance feelings of competency, thus the role of other people is vital, as was seen in our narratives. This competency, in turn, increases intrinsic motivation to continue the action, but only if accompanied by a sense of autonomy. Autonomy is increased by choice and self-directed opportunities. Feelings of 'being thrown in at the deep end', while giving rise to strong feelings, allow self-direction and therefore a feeling of autonomy. 'Being thrown in at the deep end', for some participants, created crisis, loneliness and feelings of incompetence. CET suggests that this is a necessary component for autonomy, which in turn influences motivation. It seems that this sense of autonomy may operate at an unconscious level for some participants in immersive experiences.

CET theory suggests that internalisation of processes leads to competence and reflection can be such a useful tool, as this aids internalisation. Structured and facilitated processes, as might be included within practices to support lifewide education, could offer additional support to help learners who are involved in an immersive experience, to gain this sense of competency.

The context is also important, as internalisation and integration occurs where contexts foster support, relatedness and autonomy. This perhaps explains the importance of other people or a supportive network to counter the effects of contexts that do not support these needs. Elaborating on this Kidd (1998) discusses resilience (in relation to careers). This involves emotions and attitudes, particularly flexibility and tolerating uncertainty, and involves self-esteem, autonomy and optimism. These are the personal assets that immersive experiences appear to foster. Immersive experiences have the capacity to continuously develop qualities and capacities for resilience so they can be taken both across life situations and forward into future transitions.

Gersick (1991) argued that all change in natural systems can be explained in terms of a model of punctuated equilibrium drawing on theories from six different domains. The theory assumes long periods of stability (equilibrium) that are punctuated by short periods of revolution, described as 'qualitative, metamorphic change'. Underlying natural systems are deep, enduring structures that determine what persists and what changes during transition periods, which are adaptations to new circumstances. Immersive experiences, based on our research, can be seen as examples of these short periods of revolution in an individual's life process of change.

Levinson's (1978) theory of adult development is used for the domain of 'self'. Levinson explains the strong feelings of loss and instability that arise as deep, enduring structures are threatened during a life-structure transition. The transformational process dismantles the deep structure in order to permit integration of new and old structures. Such transitions involve both loss and the emotions relating to this, and the potential for new possibilities (Hale and de Abreu 2010). This change may take place over several years (Levinson 1978) or shorter timescales (Williams 1999 suggests six months). Based on the accounts in our work, the change process can vary in time but is more in line with Williams, although the learning may accrue over many years and the changes may take a period of time to become enduring.

The profound significance of immersive experience

Through this study we have come to believe that immersive experiences are profoundly important in the development of people. They are particularly important in the significant life-changing transitions that people make throughout and across their lives. What our study has demonstrated is that immersive experiences take many forms and occur outside these widely recognised 'mega transitions'.

Our claim is that immersive experiences provide rich environments for developing a range of self-knowledge, dispositions, qualities and capabilities that are essential for current and future survival and adaptation in a complex, unpredictable and often disruptive world. Students' university experiences in themselves may be immersive but generally students don't recognise them as a discrete immersive experience – perhaps because they are often an extension of the formal educational processes with which they are already familiar and skilful in navigating. We have to look to students' wider life experiences while they are studying at university, to find the sorts of experiences that they recognise as being immersive. Our belief is that such experiences contribute in a significant way to a more complete education. By this we mean the life process that affords an individual the opportunities for developing himself in ways that are necessary to be the author of their own life (Baxter Magolda 2001, 2004, 2009).

Educators have multiple expectations for the journey that is called a college education. For example, we expect students to acquire knowledge, learn how to analyse it, and learn the process of judging what to believe themselves – what development theorists call complex ways of knowing. We expect students to develop an internal sense of identity – an understanding of how they view themselves and what they value. We expect them to learn how to construct healthy relationships with others, relationships based on mutuality rather than self-sacrifice, and relationships that affirm diversity. We expect them to integrate these ways of knowing, being and interacting with others into the capacity for self-authorship – the capacity to internally define their own beliefs, identity and relationships. This self-authorship, this internal capacity, is the necessary foundation for mutual, collaborative participation with others in adult life.

(Baxter Magolda 2001:xvi)

A lifewide concept of learning and personal development and the educational practices that support learners' self-development could embrace the immersive

experiences learners encounter in the life outside the institutional environment. It is for this reason that we propose that an imaginative lifewide curriculum should prepare learners for and give them experiences of adventuring in uncertain and unfamiliar situations where the contexts and challenges are not known, accepting the risks involved. Our role as educators is to support them when they participate in situations that require them to be resilient and help them recognise and appreciate their own transformation.

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Endnotes

1 see <http://immersiveexperience.pbwiki.com/Stories+of+immersive+experiences>