

A case of transformative learning in an online setting

A programme of online MSc courses for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) practitioners delivered by the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) offered an opportunity to explore how masters level education influences CAM practitioners' professional lives; for example, in their individual practice of their therapeutic modality, their professional identity and the wider CAM community of practice. Use of a case study methodology facilitated the generation of rich, thick data describing how CAM practitioners' professional lives are influenced by their studies and their experience of the courses. The overall finding from this research is that study and subsequent qualification at MSc level in international online cohorts may be seen to have had a profound influence upon the participants in this study. There is evidence of an impact on MSc graduate participants' frames of reference, identity, professional identity, practice, and participation in their community of practice; in addition to the acquisition of knowledge and skills in critical thinking and research. For the graduate participants in this research the experience of their MSc studies has been a transformative one. The concept of transformative learning (TL) was developed by Jack Mezirow in 1978 and has been further expanded upon by Knud Illeris. Mezirow defines TL as learning which transforms the meaning perspectives or frames of reference by which we understand the world, while Illeris proposes that TL also has an impact on identity. A contribution to the pedagogy of TL may be found in the formulation and utilisation of the analytic categories of professional identity, practice, and community of practice, which offer a new approach for researching TL in professional and/or vocational groups. This study demonstrates that e-learning programmes can offer opportunities for transformative learning and adds to the call for an appreciation of the potential of e-learning to deliver profound and meaningful learning experiences.

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