

some student nurses. For example, some child branch students may find the discussion on the work of Piaget and child development stages of particular interest; and for mental health students, the chapter on psychoanalysis may be of interest. However, I think the people who would find this book most useful would be those involved in Education and Special Education. For students, it would be a valuable resource, while for those already in special education it would be a useful reference book to update and enhance their existing knowledge base.

Adult Learning and la Recherche Féminine: Reading Resilience and Hélène Cixous

Elizabeth Chapman Hoult
Palgrave Macmillian (2012)
Review by David Mathew

'Finding a place in which the dead can speak is a central concern of this work.'

It is fair to say that very few of the books that we receive for review contain many sentences like this. Then again, not many books about pedagogy or education use words like 'Ecdysis' as chapter headings either, or contain sections entitled 'The Risks Involved in Dancing with Snakes' or detailed analyses of the work of playwright David Mamet. In fact, this is one of the most original and entertaining books I have ever read. So impressive and thought-provoking is it that the space allotted for this review could easily be taken up by a consideration of the first chapter alone. Such is the quality of the writing that the temptation is to quote well-chosen phrases in the hope of convincing other people of one's opinion.

This is a book about adult learners who persevere against difficult odds. It is 'an attempt to read resilient learning through texts not normally included in educational research studies – myth, poetry, drama, and autobiography' – such as *Educating Rita* or *The Winter's*

Tale. By itself this would seem interesting and ambitious, but the author goes one step further by introducing a lens through which to view the whole proceedings: this lens is the work of Hélène Cixous, whose writings provided the author with 'a theoretical basis from which to challenge the central pessimism of Bourdieu's theory and the limitations of applying Derrida's philosophical language to real-life learners.' The author adds: 'It has also enabled me to think much more deeply about the connections between reading, writing, and survival.'

How often, I wonder, do we consider our learners as survivors? We can usually think of a specific example of someone who has made the pedagogic journey and refused to give up, even when giving up was what most of us would do in the same circumstances. But survivors? While the book's title might lead a reader into an (incorrect) assumption that the book will be a feminist or even post-feminist deconstruction of academe (or of pedagogy), there are even more complicated readings of resilience offered up; and as a book to revisit, it will make you think and it will make you humble. It might even make you grateful; it certainly made me feel grateful – happy that I travelled on when I was tempted to stop.

I hope I can be forgiven the inclusion of such an autobiographical gobblet. I submit that it would be difficult not to think about your own learning and your learners as you read Elizabeth Chapman Hoult's words. *Adult Learning and la Recherche Féminine* is a rare discovery. It isn't often that a book impresses me as much as this one did, and I hereby salute the author's acuity and skill.

(Elizabeth Chapman Hoult has written an article for the *JPD*. It appears next in this issue. – Eds.)

Resilience in Adult Learners: some pedagogical implications

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What makes some mature students succeed in higher education, despite all logical predictions of their failure or withdrawal is the focus of my book, *Adult Learning and La Recherche Féminine: Reading Resilience and Hélène Cixous* (2012). In it I read resilient adult learning through a number of texts that are not normally accessed in social science. Poetry, drama and autobiographical writing are used alongside interview transcripts with particularly resilient real adult learners. A key argument in the book is that resilient learning is

elusive and mutable and, by its very nature, impossible to capture and categorise. I imagine it residing somewhere in between the polarities of essentialism (i.e. the idea that some people are just 'naturally' resilient) and performativity (the idea that resilience is a set of skills which any of us can simply pick up and learn). This understanding of resilience as a fluid, energetic and partly transferable force is far more optimistic than regarding it as a set of characteristics which are fixed (or not) to individuals. Crucially, it means

that resilience is teachable, or at least that it is possible to create conditions where it may flourish. So how do we recognise it and what does it look like? Resilience is not the same as persistence. The difference is subtle but recognisable to anyone who has taught students who will not take advice and who cling on, through re-sits, appeals panels and complaints procedures. Resilient students do something more than just complete the course against the odds; they do so with confidence, agency and discernment.

Despite its mercurial nature, some capabilities emerged in my research as common themes in the way that resilience is performed. For example, resilient adult learners **have the ability to engage in open readings, resisting closed meanings and they take a playful approach to language**. They use their imagination to read – texts, themselves and life itself - in plural ways. Most notably they resist and refuse authoritative readings of their own lives and they resist the patronising and pessimistic prognoses which go alongside them. They are, in effect, open people who do not have a fixed understanding of narratives and academic language and they have the ability to re-cast life events that others would see as tragic in ways that are educative, or even protective. Something that was striking about many of the adult learners in the study was that they are able to resist educational exclusion – the fate that many of their peers may suffer – while at the same time they do not yearn for full inclusion; they relish their position as semi-outsider. It led me to conclude that resilient adult learners are **able to recognize, withstand and negotiate the tension between inclusion and exclusion**.

There is a bravery that comes from being a semi-outsider. The learners in the book have a fluid, performative understanding of identity – both as learners and as people. I thought about this metaphorically and I argue that resilient adult learners show **a willingness to divest themselves of their clothing and to wear different clothes**. A key and obvious characteristic of adult learners is that they have had many other roles before returning to study, and they continue to have many identities while they learn: careers, parents, caring for elderly parents and partners, community workers, etc.. Learning becomes one more identity to add to this set of costumes. The most resilient people seem to be able to slip between these identities remarkably fluidly, yet draw on each as a resource. One adult learner in her fifties talked to me about the protective and almost immunising effects of previous failures. She compared herself to younger students in an elite university who saw failure as potentially devastating.

Pedagogical folklore has it that the teacher transforms the learner, like Pygmalion the sculptor who sculpts the perfect woman out of ivory. I would argue, however, that actually the learner seeks out and transforms the teacher, coaxing – or even forcing – a weak teacher towards excellence. They are strategically disobedient and they achieve the very fine balance between surrender and agency. **They resist passivity by dealing actively with their teachers**. Many resilient adult learners are ambivalent about, if not oppositional to, the academic system which seems to transform their lives. Some of them complain about feeling infantilised by teachers and others draw attention to the deep inequalities and disingenuities of academia. Despite this, they seem to be able to work within the system while subtly subverting it. Others will find an alternative, unofficial teacher.

Bourdieu's notion of 'the miraculé' was central to my research. Literally meaning 'one on whom a miracle has been performed', it was his somewhat ironic term for those people who were able to escape the gloomy reproductive nature of education. The notion of the miracle is used metaphorically throughout the book and I argue that adult learners can be read as miraculés, for example, they experience a sort of resurrection. That is to say, adult learning is a kind of reawakening into education for people who have missed out the first time. **Resilient adult learners have, at some level, a faith in the process which they recognise as stronger than them**. Their lives are transformed in some way or another by learning. They seem to have a deep, intuitive understanding that the process is painful and at times it makes them feel wretched, but that it does good work. There is a sense of surrender to it. But transformation is bilateral or multi-lateral – it happens in the space between the learners, the teacher and whatever it is that is being learned. Deep learning involves huge amounts of anxiety for everyone involved. The resilient learners don't back off. They don't conform as a way of obviating that anxiety. Somehow they have the strength to walk through the fire and they break through to the other side.

Pedagogical Implications

An implication of these ideas might be that we need to understand disobedience and challenge as a feature of resilience and not evidence of the pedagogical relationship breaking down. This is not an excuse for disrespect in the classroom; just an acknowledgement of one way of developing autonomy. We also need to draw explicitly on mature students' life experiences as a rich resource, rather than expecting them to begin from a blank slate.

The understanding of resilience as a quality which is both performative and mutable raises all sorts of questions and challenges for teaching in higher education. If resilience occurs in the space in between the learner, the teacher and the institution, then we need to ask how each of those offers the potential for resilience in the others. It also asks us to re-evaluate some of our pedagogical responses to behaviours that we might see as difficult or obstructive. Pedagogical practice becomes one of shared growth and challenge; we need to recognize and explicitly talk about anxiety without trying to close it down or protect learners from

it. We also need to provide opportunities for learners to perform different identities in their learning and to provide them with ways of acquiring the skills that lead to multiple reading techniques, in literal as well as philosophical senses.

Reference

Hoult, E.C. (2012) *Adult Learning and La Recherche Féminine: Reading Resilience and Hélène Cixous*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

(Please see the review of Elizabeth's book elsewhere in the Book Reviews section. – Eds.)

Enhancing learner knowledge and the application of that knowledge via computer based assessment

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Abstract

This paper details the process that the author went through as a novice action researcher whilst designing and implementing a new computer based assignment within a Higher Education institution within the UK. The paper outlines the initial stages of a project which was designed to assist students in the transformation from declarative to functioning knowledge (Biggs & Tang 2011). The implementation of a new summative assessment was to help students to develop a deeper rather than surface approach to learning. Owing to the personal and professional beliefs of the author, the project was designed using Norton's (2009) action research methodology of ITDEM. The research also consisted of a specific theoretical framework which included Kolb's (1984) and Atherton's (2009) theories on experiential learning and a constructivist approach (Swan 2005) to developing and designing an intervention. It also highlights the difficulties that were faced by the researcher whilst identifying and tackling this issue and implementing the new assessment. In addition during the initial stages, the research design encompassed the piloting of the Touchstone Open Source Platform because the University's Question Mark Platform was not compatible with the demands of the new assignment. This would allow an online assignment to be utilised. It would also produce instant results and feedback for the students whilst reducing marking loads (Wilkinson & Rai 2007). In order to evaluate and analyse the results from the research, data was collected and measured through the attainment of individual summative grades which were available as part of the normal academic process. Moreover, the grades that would normally be available within the university infrastructure for grading purposes were utilised to

collect data on the new assessment. Upon analysis, initial results indicated an increase in the number of students who had achieved a level of functioning knowledge in comparison to previous cohorts (see fig 1). However, despite some indications of success, the author is unable to generalise this success at present owing to this project being a pilot study for the new Question Mark Platform. This paper concludes with a number of suggestions for modifying the new assessment and recommendations for the next cycle in the research process.

Keywords: Action Research, declarative knowledge, functioning knowledge, Touchstone, constructivism.

Context of the Subject

I am the unit lead on one of the core level 4 units. Traditionally students from four different degree programmes within the Applied Social Studies Department (Criminology, Child and Adolescent Studies, Applied Social Studies, Health & Social Care) study this unit as part of their core level 4 units. The current cohort consists of 245 students with a diversity of backgrounds and abilities. The curriculum consists of one lecture and one workshop per week. It is on this unit that students develop and expand their knowledge of social divisions within society, such as class and ethnicity. As such, the unit aims to develop within the students an understanding of major theoretical explanations of contemporary social divisions. It also aims to develop key knowledge within the students of critical and dominant political ideologies which are responsible for implementing policies designed to address the many divisions within society. In this way the unit aims to develop a clarity and depth of knowledge required for