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## **Learning from the unfamiliar: How does working with people who use mental health services impact on students' learning and development?**

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Service learning is an experiential pedagogic approach that is predicated on students learning in authentic situations. It is often problem orientated and provides opportunities for community engagement in ways that enhance a student's capacity as socially aware individuals. There is evidence that such learning opportunities can enhance personal development, team and collaborative skills as well as improve self-confidence. This paper reports on a qualitative research project that explored the experience of a group of students who worked in a service learning project with users of mental health services. Using the lifeworld (Ashworth 2003) as a means to analyse the data, provided a rich description of the impact it had on their learning. Three themes are portrayed, being together, encounters in the real world, and becoming. Important aspects of the findings include, the opportunity to learn without the constraint of pre-determined learning outcomes, learning through uncertainty, and learning from those who are different and unfamiliar. Considering the data from the perspective of Jarvis's (2006) learning theory we explore how particular situations stimulated disjuncture, those uncomfortable moments that instigate learning. The paper concludes by proposing the benefits of a tight-loose design to pedagogic approaches, and how learning from those who are different provide students with opportunities to engage with the messiness of the real world.

**Keywords:** service learning; experiential learning; disjuncture; lifeworld

### **Introduction**

Internationally, many universities are conscious of the need to actively engage with and make a difference to both local and global communities. Increasingly, they are interested in how they can support and develop students as socially aware citizens. Often couched as civic engagement, universities demonstrate their commitment to community through a variety of approaches, which Boland (2010, 2014) describes as complex and diverse. Service learning, as a pedagogy, is one such civic engagement approach that encourages cross-cultural understanding, active citizenship, connects universities to their communities, provides real-world learning for students and raises awareness of social justice issues (Chupp and Joseph 2010; Butin 2010; Holland 2010). Service learning as a term is more common in the United

States and South Africa and used to a lesser extent in the U.K. and Europe, although sometimes described in these countries as ‘community-based learning’ (Boland 2014). There is the suggestion that the evidence of impact of this type of pedagogy in the U.K. is lacking (Roskell et al. 2012) and more generally that research should explore how students’ confidence, self-esteem, communication and collaboration are enhanced by service learning (Holland 2010). This study therefore explores the impact of a service learning opportunity for a group of students working, learning and collaborating with users of mental health care services in a U.K. university.

### **Characteristics of a service learning pedagogy**

Service learning is described as an authentic and experiential pedagogic approach that is often problem-orientated, in which students construct their own knowledge (Sindi and Fikile 2013). Key to effective service learning are the core values of reciprocity and mutuality - less about doing something for a community, more about engaging with that community to solve problems and address challenges together (Boland 2014; Butin 2010). Chupp and Joseph (2010) suggest that it is critical that students engage in reflection in order to process their experiences effectively (Astin et al. 2000; Butin 2010), without which learning may be adversely affected. Others support the view that service learning must be part of an academic programme and hence awarded credit (Straus and Eckendrode 2014; Boland 2010). This anticipates a link to disciplinary content and that reflective practice is built into the requirements for achieving learning outcomes. This may be one of the reasons for the debate concerning the differentiation between service learning and volunteerism. Volunteering activities may not be linked to assessment and therefore the assumption is that students will not engage in reflection. However, Butin (2010) considers service learning as having multiple perspectives, from academic learning activities at one extreme to volunteerism at the other. More of a concern for him and for Marullo and Edwards (2000) is the risk that service learning becomes a charitable act rather than something which holds to key characteristics of respect, reciprocity, relevance and reflection

### **Converge as a service learning pedagogy**

Converge is a partnership between a UK University and its local National Health Service Hospital Trust which delivers courses and other educational opportunities to people who use mental health services. Now in its seventh year, Converge has provided access to education for 119 participants, hereafter known as Converge students, many engaging in multiple

courses. Nomenclature is a contested area in mental health and the phrase Converge students is used because it indicates the relationship we wish to establish with participants who use mental health services. Undergraduate and postgraduate students (hereafter known as students) deliver courses in theatre, dance, music, fine arts, creative writing, psychology, sports and life coaching. They are also involved in a choir and a theatre company, 'Out of Character'. Over 90 students are involved in delivering short courses to Converge students. Students lead groups and facilitate activities after an initial period of participation and occasionally take the lead from the outset. University tutors are sometimes directly involved in teaching the courses alongside their students. More commonly students work with established Converge tutors, some of whom are graduates or more recently mental health service users, all are experts in their subject area. They offer support and mentoring to students as they experiment with their own ideas and creativity while gaining real world experience in the community. University Tutors will also be involved occasionally in student assessment activities at the end of the courses.

Within the spirit of a service learning pedagogy, underpinned by social justice ethos, Converge has propagated symbiotic projects and partnerships driven by innovation and best practice. It aims to challenge the dynamics of social exclusion that make it difficult for people who have used mental health services to access quality education and employment. Universities remain privileged and relatively well resourced institutions. The aim of Converge is to harness the university's knowledge, expertise, good will and forward-looking energy for the benefit of local people who use mental health services. It can be considered as an attempt to heal the 'fracture' between people who experience mental health problems and their communities that began with their disappearance into large mental hospitals in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – what Foucault (2001, 35) called 'the great confinement'. It was a fracture deepened by medicalization and professional power, the scars of which still remain. The mental illness identity is corrosive and persistent; it limits aspirations and damages self-esteem. Converge aims to offer people who experience mental health problems the opportunity to challenge that identity through becoming part of the university community. Institutions define identities - in the case of the psychiatric hospital, identity can be 'spoiled' (Goffman, 1968) by stigma and over-identification with the diagnosis. Universities call for very different selves - aspirational, hopeful and focused on personal and professional development. The former confines, the latter seeks to liberate. Current approaches to mental health emphasise the importance of non-stigmatizing educational opportunities (Rowe 2015) Therefore the aim of the scheme is to offer people with mental health problems the

opportunity to benefit from the transformative potential of the university community. The result is twofold: a rich and exciting educational opportunity for people with mental health problems, alongside authentic and practical work experience for university students. The involvement of university students is a key characteristic of Converge and a reason for its success, measured in terms of positive rates of attendance and retention of participating students. The sustainability of service learning is often highlighted as a challenge (Butin 2010), yet this scheme continues to be supported financially and is visible through the external recognition of a national award for innovation in 2014, and being shortlisted for a Health Service Journal Award in 2015.

A great deal is to be gained from the relationships that develop between university and Converge students. Rowe et al. (2013) specifically explored the impact of the Converge experience on a group of theatre students' attitudes and perceptions of users of mental health care services. Drawing on Gordon Allport's 'contact hypothesis' (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), which proposes that interpersonal contact can reduce prejudice, they found that students by the end of their experience no longer saw Converge students as different, vulnerable or in need of special care. They went on to propose that the precise nature of the contact needs to include the following: working together on a joint task; challenging identities; developing a shared language and collaborations where there is no one right answer to a problem.

Rowe et al. (2013) suggested that students perceived Converge learning opportunities to be quite different to anything they had previously engaged in previously during their time at University. However, it did not explore how it was different in terms of the ways in which students understood learning to happen. This study aims to provide a better understanding of how learning happens as a means to support a rationale to increase engagement of students in Converge. In addition, that this study could provide evidence that would stimulate interest in adopting service learning type pedagogies that provide students with real world and mutually beneficial encounters. Our key research questions therefore include: How are the learning opportunities in Converge projects perceived by the students who engage in them? What are their perceptions of the impact of this experience on themselves as learners?

## **Methodology**

Each student came to Converge with different personal histories, life experiences and motivations for engaging with the projects. The most effective way to capture the richness of their lived experiences with their inherent differences and similarities was through a

phenomenological approach. Drawing from empirical foundations (e.g. that of Husserl), phenomenology is concerned with describing the ‘essence’ of the lived experience and getting as close as possible to the participant’s world, describing rather than explaining it (Langdridge 2007). Ashworth (2015) proposes that phenomenological studies can be enhanced by adopting the lifeworld as a means through which to view the data. His approach is informed by existentialist authors such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty and he sets out seven fractions which are essential to the individual experience of any phenomenon, each sometimes to a more or lesser extent (Ashworth 2003, 2015). Consequently, while the phenomenon may be personally perceived differently by the students, the lifeworld through which they are perceived is universal (Ashworth 2015). The seven inter-related fractions include selfhood, sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, project and discourse.

### *Sample*

Students were invited to participate through an open call to those who were involved in Converge projects during 2014-15. Six students agreed to participate in the research study, engaging in two semi-structured interviews, one just as they had started their engagement with Converge and the second at the end of their experience. (For more detail of the participants see table 1). There were similarities and differences in the students’ engagement with Converge projects. Four were involved in practice-led subjects and although the focus was teaching “how to” do dance or drama, students were also required to bring creative ideas for practice, and structural information about performance to the groups they worked with. The student who was delivering a course about happiness, brought her own ideas and research knowledge to the sessions but over time discussions and content were increasingly Converge student-led. This was similar for the student teaching an art course.

The interviews were conducted jointly by both researchers (A, with a background of mental health and drama, and B, educational development). All of the students gave informed consent and are identified in the findings using pseudonyms. The study was given ethical approval from the University.

### Table 1

In the first interview we asked participants general questions about their approaches to learning and their expectations of working with Converge students. We also explored what drew them to Converge and how they would know if they had been successful in their learning. In the post Converge interview we then explored how they had got on and how they

had managed their learning experiences. Two students also shared their reflective assignments, and these were included in the data set. In summary, we wanted to understand if, and how, this experience had made a difference to them as learners, how it compared to learning in the rest of their programmes and how that might influence them in future.

### ***Data analysis***

We each independently undertook an initial holistic review of the data in audio form, seeking to identify the essence of the students' experiences and to describe them through the lens of the lifeworld (Ashworth 2003; Langdrige 2008). A subsequent discussion took place to share and compare our findings as we sought to understand the students' experiences. This process gave rise to initial themes and was followed by a return to the data and more detailed selective consideration to highlight commonalities and differences pertinent to those initial themes. This resulted in refining our thoughts and establishing a description of the experiences as set out in the findings. It was not the intention of the study to produce findings that are generalizable but to represent the views of the participants within this particular context.

### ***Trustworthiness***

*Epoche* is a term used to describe the setting aside or bracketing of a researcher's preconceptions of an experience to ensure a true understanding of the phenomenon as perceived by the participants, although the extent to which this is possible is much debated (Ashworth 2003; Langdrige 2008). Ashworth (2015) suggests that while it is essential to true phenomenological description, this excludes bracketing of the fractions of the lifeworld. He states 'there is a need to pay attention to the lifeworld in which that experience is immersed and from which it derives much of its meaning' (4). As a means to enhance the trustworthiness of our study we both adopted a critical reflexive stance towards the data analysis in order that we might come fresh to the student's experiences in an attempt to achieve *epoche*. Each of us came to the project from different backgrounds and through collaborative discussions we raised questions, unfamiliar ideas and explanations helping each other to see things anew.

### **The Results**

The data analysis produced three themes which most meaningfully relate to three of the lifeworld fractions, Sociality - which we have called *Being together*, Project - *Learning through encounters in the real world*, and Selfhood - *Becoming*. Inevitably there are



connections between the themes and elements of the remaining four lifeworld fractions which can be found within each of them.

### ***Being together***

Ashworth (2015) suggests that identity is tied up with our relationship with others. 'Being together', accepted as part of the community with Converge students, and in some instances the teacher, was an important aspect of this experience for all six students. The initial part of their experience was learning how to become part of a very different group to any they had worked with previously. Some students had worked with children, but most just with peers. In the pre-Converge interviews there were expressions of anxiety about being accepted, of being an outsider, and a lack of confidence that their ideas about the work they needed to produce together would be valued. Charlotte and Jenny described this as '*settling down with the group*', Jenny going on to suggest it takes time to be taken seriously, as opposed to being seen as '*the weirdo who had just joined the group*'. There was certainly no sense for the performance students that they knew more than Converge students and expected to be the authoritative figures in the group. They didn't want to be seen as taking over or, as Sam describes, '*patronising*'. Their desire was for collaboration and to benefit from working with new people and their different ideas:

People can actually talk to you, so you are not put on a pedestal...I never wanted to be on that level... I always wanted to be more approachable with the group, so it's more casual. (Sophie)

We wondered if the fact that Converge students have mental health problems would make a difference to working and learning together. Students did express concerns about the vulnerability of the Converge students, about offending them and whether or not they would achieve their performance aims. Anna, who had more life experience and was studying community psychology, was aware of the danger of '*pathologizing*' the experiences of people in the group. She did accept that people who have used mental health services are not essentially different, saying that '*we are all the spectrum*'. A key issue related to the fear of '*saying the wrong thing*', that students would '*use the wrong words*'. Sophie talked of '*being careful all around*' and, in her post Converge interview, admitted that her fears that Converge students could be potentially dangerous, unpredictable and fragile never transpired. In post-Converge interviews, students expressed surprise that Converge students worked so well, and

how different this was to learning in class with peers or with professional dancers, who often lacked focus and time on task. Sam was '*surprised*' by the ability and creativity of the group, implying that she had low expectations at the outset. In addition, students talked about an absence of competitiveness and no conflict, instead real collaboration with everyone working towards the same objectives. At the end of their experiences students portrayed pleasure at being together with Converge students and talked about their achievements and collective effort of achieving the end performance.

It's a nice release to be with a new group and forget everything else is going on and just dance. I think I have caught their attitude. (Sam)

For those students practicing theatre and dance the physical inter-subjectivity was crucial. There was collaboration through dialogue as they came together as a community, but for some their interaction occurred through their bodies in the creative process. Charlotte described her experience as '*merging with Converge students in dance duets and through intuition knowing when to step in and help*'. This was also expressed through the possibilities of doing things differently, of feeling a certain freedom that is not always present in class yet was somehow permitted by the presence of Converge students.

They (Converge students) were thinking of stuff I wouldn't even think of. (Sam)

Converge staff and tutors played different roles in the classes. They were present in the dance and theatre project, however Anna and Bernadette led their sessions independently. When the teacher or facilitator was present they were not perceived in the same way as in other course situations. Charlotte saw hers as being '*less teacherly*' and that it was an opportunity to get to know her properly as an individual. Sam described a less hierarchical structure to what she was used to in class. '*We were all equal, it wasn't like there was a lecturer at the front*'. However, it was not always positive, with Jenny worried that her group would '*cast me aside*' in favour of those who had been in the group longer.

### ***Learning through encounters in the real world***

This theme draws from the 'project' fraction of the lifeworld and demonstrates how the students talked about learning in their Converge projects. There was a strong temporal nature

to the theme, as they looked back on previous learning and reflected on how Converge offered different ways to develop, and how it might influence their future plans. Emotional feelings that students had about their learning also surfaced.

*Motivation to learn.*

All of the participants were highly motivated, likely to be the ones to go beyond what is required and therefore the most probable students to engage with a project like Converge. Describing themselves variously as a perfectionist (Sam), someone who forced herself to do things (Anna), having a tendency to throw herself in at the deep end (Charlotte), they all showed a deep sense of wanting to be involved. Two students talked about waiting patiently to start their projects, despite the challenges it might potentially give them.

We explored students' approaches to learning in the first interviews and for many of them this proved difficult to articulate. As the majority were performers, it was no surprise that they talked about practice/rehearsal as a way of learning. It was the activity of actually doing something that they felt made for successful learning. Some felt this was how they got better at academic aspects, too - through practice and hard work. Jenny described how as a child she had not done very well at school, but got bored being at the bottom, so pushed herself, having realised that her learning success was up to her. All these students demonstrated a personal drive and commitment to their learning.

I go out of my way to do as much as I can (this is what tutors say). I think I put too much pressure on myself-do too much. (Charlotte)

For the theatre and dance students, success was about the process as well as the end performance, whereas for Anna it was connected to whether or not the Converge students returned to her next session. For Sam, success was measured internally by a realisation that she could do things without thinking, while for others there were mixed views as to the external recognition of success measured through module marks and/or applause from an audience.

I just never think of negative thought. It's not the end of the world if I get a bad grade, it's all learning. (Sophie)

None of the students showed any disappointment in their post-Converge interviews, and although challenging at times, learning appeared to be easy and engagement intrinsically motivated. For Charlotte, Wednesday afternoon was her favourite time in the week, she felt happier in herself as a result, and similarly Sam described her post-Converge glow. *'As soon as I come out of Converge I always feel more uplifted after Converge.'* Sophie summed it up:

From the whole of second years I can safely say this is the 'it' module of the years. It's something I have been able to feel myself in and been able to work with people whose personalities complement each other, and I think we have worked fantastic as a team.

### *Relational Learning*

The foundation of the Converge experience is that YSJ students, Converge students and teachers all learn together. Creating an environment of mutuality, trust and reciprocity was important, with everyone working together, and this was certainly true for the students engaging in these projects.

X wasn't really a teacher, it was more like we are all in a little collective we were just all together and supporting each other. (Sam)

This atmosphere also enabled and supported effective feedback for students, from peers, Converge students and tutors. At times feedback was not something explicit but was described as a sense of knowing between individuals and recognition that sometimes there is not necessarily a correct way of doing things. This was particularly evident for all the performance students.

What you don't see, someone else might... if that move is embedded in your brain, it's hard to see yourself. (Sophie)

I can tell through body language if I have done something wrong. I could tell from the way they (Converge students) engaged with me. (Charlotte)

I don't know if anything is going to be right. I guess we just run with it, its part of the flow and pattern we make. (Jenny)

### *Apprenticeship*

All of the participants apart from Anna and Bernadette started out with a teacher by their side. There was for all a sense of being an apprentice. In particular, Anna acknowledged the challenge of doing something new and the temporal nature of learning, initially being slow and clunky, learning the ropes, and gradually being handed increasing amounts of responsibility. Leadership of the sessions gave the students confidence, replacing the anxiety that had been apparent in pre-Converge interviews.

Exploring with the students how they worked out what they had to do in their sessions evoked a range of responses, but all emphasised the importance of planning. Anna and Bernadette described preparing too much material for their sessions, anxious they did not want to appear to be dis-organised. The performance students planned how to facilitate particular activities and discussed ideas with their teachers and described post-session moments when they reflected on how things went with Converge students. In the post-Converge interviews it became apparent that almost all the students had learnt most when the plan went awry. Often portrayed as critical incidents, the students stepped up, developed ownership of others' learning, made decisions and in general moved the groups on. Jenny described herself as a meticulous planner, yet following an incident with a Converge student she suggested there was a need to *'take confidence into the space. If it doesn't work, scrap it. Improvise, don't stick rigidly to the plan. Let the participants feed you things.'*

These sorts of experiences gave students opportunities to learn about themselves and made them realise that working with authentic communities can be risky. There was an underlying feeling of uncertainty that this sort of learning is terrifying yet rather exciting. It is not safe, as in a standard module experience where there is a set of outcomes and pre-determined learning goals. In Converge projects, you are never quite sure what will happen. Charlotte described a difficult situation where she felt panic and concern when an incident occurred, thinking it was something she had done wrong. She subsequently learnt the need to be more flexible and, as with the others, developed the ability to think on her feet. For service learning to be effective it is suggested that students need to reflect on their experiences, but we suggest there is also a need to develop the ability to be able to reflect-in-action by creating opportunities that encourage this.

The experience of working alongside people who use mental health services provided all the students an opportunity to work in the 'real world'. Phrases like *'authentic'*, *'hands on'*, *'taking responsibility'* and *'meeting different people'* were used to convey new

experiences that placed challenging demands on the students. One strength of Converge is that it creates such learning opportunities that for a variety of reasons can be very challenging, yet it is this aspect that seems to give the students the most self-confidence and self-belief.

We had to think on our feet... keep Converge rolling. It was our time. It made me realise we can do it. We were in charge and led the session. (Sam)

### *Experiential learning*

Converge provides a pedagogic approach that is about doing rather than learning content, which is how students described many of their everyday learning opportunities on their degrees. Jenny stated that *'in other modules you go away and learn facts and then go away and write about facts, and I don't feel I learn that way.'* Converge was identified as a chance to develop skills by working with and learning from different groups of people, to experiment in ways that stepped outside of traditional didactic and teacher-controlled learning spaces. They talked about enjoying learning from doing and had a real sense of pride at their own and their groups' achievements. Ultimately, students saw this learning as a way to connect to the real world, described by Sophie as having

bigger dynamics, learning with and from people with different life experiences and from different age ranges' and a 'complete experience of university.

In the studio I doubt myself, whereas in Converge I am more open minded, I feel more free in Converge. It has a structure but it feels more free. (Sam)

It's engaging with the wider world...it's an opportunity to act out some of the ideas in the back of my mind. (Bernadette)

### ***Becoming***

Our final theme, 'Becoming' denotes a range of achievements mentioned by the students. They spoke about becoming more accomplished as teachers, facilitators and learners, and most emphasized that the authentic experience Converge afforded them would prepare them for life beyond the university. Working in the project provided some with increased self-knowledge and a sense of freedom from the constraints of university life. Sam expressed this clearly when she said, *'I felt I was part of something outside uni, I don't feel like a university student anymore.'* It also led to a revision of the ways in which students expressed the

purpose of their work and the roles they assumed within it, revealing a changing understanding of the work and the nature of the people they were working with.

### *Becoming a teacher/facilitator*

One of the most pressing challenges was to teach and facilitate sessions. The anxiety that this evoked was clearly described. Sam spoke at length about the moment when the usual tutor left the room and she and her fellow student were left to take the lead. '*We were the ones in charge then and we had the responsibility of taking the session.*' The challenge of leading the session inevitably produced anxiety for students. Charlotte '*didn't want to take over*' and insightfully she said that she was '*balancing my input and balancing their input.*' She tried to hold back on her own ideas and allow time for people to develop theirs. Anna, who led from the outset, delivered an eight week course entitled *Understanding Happiness* with no prior experience, described how '*there is no way to build up to teaching.*' Relating how the course she taught to Converge students was at times quite chaotic and her teaching as '*crowd control*', she reflected on the change in her role over time and of becoming more of a facilitator rather than a teacher.

“It seemed best to relax and go with the flow, my expectation about me doing the course changed and it became more about me being part of it “(Anna)

She spoke about how the group began to '*lead itself*', she began to learn how to '*use the group to teach and help*' instead of thinking that she was solely responsible. She recognised that this calls for vulnerability on the part of the tutor and considered this to be an important quality of facilitation. Bernadette also taught a course to Converge students but, unlike the other students, she was drawn to the opportunity primarily because of a desire to become a teacher rather than a particular desire to work with Converge. As a part-time mature student she gave a real sense of not belonging in the everyday teaching and learning groups of undergraduate students, and found that Converge provided her with a place where she could feel part of a group. Her experience portrayed, as the others, a degree of anxiety but reaffirmed her wish to develop a career as an art teacher.

“I wondered if some of the (Converge) students would struggle as my course is so experimental, sometimes to paint abstract is a bit scary.... I was really encouraged as the group were really prepared to experiment.” (Bernadette)

Students talked about learning other important facilitation skills, such as *'trying to involve everyone'* and the importance of *'active listening'*. Sophie spoke about one drama session which, she felt, ended with people feeling *'heavy, loaded and depressed'*. She spoke to the tutor leading the course about this and they talked through the importance of *'de-roling'* at the end of a session so that people did not leave with feelings evoked by the session.

#### *Becoming: Self-learning*

For Sophie there was a sense of becoming more *'accomplished as a person'* through helping others *'perform'* in theatre rather than her own performance, which is how she had previously focused her energies. Her social identity moved from being the centre of attention to becoming a facilitator of others. Given the mental health context of the work, it is interesting that Charlotte felt she had learned about how to take care of her own wellbeing and not to *'beat herself up'* when things don't go well. Similarly, Jenny spoke at length about her feelings and personal wellbeing during her work with Converge. With her permission, we paraphrase her reflective writing. At first she writes that she lacks *'self assurance'* and that her ideas were *'mediocre'* in comparison to those of other people. Later in her time with Converge she reports that her *'confidence began to grow'*, which she attributes to *'the participants in Converge being supportive and understanding to the notion that we are students, just as they are, and we are all subject to making faults.'*

#### *Becoming: identity, role and purpose*

The ways in which students expressed the purpose of their work in Converge and their roles they assumed within it reveal a changing understanding of the work and the nature of the people they were working with.

Our first interview with Charlotte was after her first session of the dance class. It is clear that she is interpreting the purpose of the work to be directed towards the improvement of the circumstances of participants. She thought that the exercises were designed to *'stretch'* them and *'to take them out of their comfort zone'* or to *'challenge habitual patterns'*. These are not surprising interpretations for someone hoping to work in dance therapy, however in her second interview at the conclusion of the work, she emphasized the dance and the performance work being over the therapeutic purpose. Similarly, Sophie unequivocally states in her second interview that *'performance is our ultimate aim'*.



Anna saw the purpose to '*facilitate learning*' to challenge pervading ideas and to '*get people thinking*'. Aware that a course entitled 'Understanding Happiness' could become focused on individual problems, she hoped the course would be '*an educational, intellectual engagement with the material*.' She described a difficult movement when this aim to maintain an educational focus was challenged. She had been sharing research with the course into the importance of social support when a Converge student asked, '*what if you don't have any friends and family?*'

Students undertook Converge for a number of reasons related to their future career path and professional and personal development. Anna was '*hoping to learn as much as I can teach*.' Sam and Bernadette wanted experience of teaching and of leading a group. The latter talked about gaining '*hands-on practice*'. For others it was more life changing. Sophie had begun her degree wishing to become a professional performer and had now decided that she wanted to develop a career in arts and health.

Working with a different group of people not on my course, they are part of the university in a way. It was nice, it felt more of an enrichment experience to go to these things to meet new people. It's really hard to describe it, it's done a U-turn for my learning" (Sophie)

Using Ashworth's (2013) approach to considering our data through the lens of the lifeworld gave an insight into what came across as intensely personal and joyful learning experiences. Students developed an increasing sense of agency through their time as Converge students, often brimming with enthusiasm about learning in this way. Many participants looked forward to re-engaging with Converge in the following academic year. It seemed that learning from the unfamiliar was a key factor. None of the students had previous experience of a Converge project. Different can be exciting, challenging and quite scary all at once, but also an opportunity to learn in new and interesting ways.

## **Discussion**

This study set out to explore two questions: firstly, how the learning opportunities in Converge projects were perceived by students and secondly, what impact this experience had on them as learners in the short and long term. The findings of this study reveal a rich and detailed learning journey for all the students occurring within their overall university experience. At the beginning, students learnt how to be part of an unfamiliar group, with the

second stage in the journey was engagement in learning experiences that took place in the sessions in collaboration with the Converge students. The final stage was about becoming somehow changed, as an individual. That change included thinking and feeling differently about themselves and their learning, reflecting on their time with Converge, how they seemed to have grown through the experience. Within this particular context, our evidence suggests that engagement in Converge projects positively impacted on the learning of the students who chose to participate, and that this opportunity is really quite different to their conventional University experiences.

Key learning moments for students were revealed through critical incident stories where they had to take responsibility for their own and others' learning. Students often portrayed their learning emotively, and this reflects the relational aspects of the situations, the commitment students had to each other, and the investment in the group they were working with. In a conceptual paper Desmond and Jowitt (2012) described a dialogical experiential activity and proposed conclusions similar to our own, highlighting the importance of interpersonal aspects of the experience and that it is in this in-between space that learning has the potential to occur. To realise this learning, they suggest that an individual must be fully engaged in the activity both cognitively *and* emotionally. Ileris (2014) suggests that it is the affective aspects of reflection that can most frequently prompt a review of previously held opinions. Opportunities that promote socio-emotional learning have been found to change students' perceptions about difference, build respect and enable them to become more responsible individuals (Rowe et al 2013; Simons and Cleary 2006). Emotion provoked by external situations, such as the critical incidents students portrayed, Jarvis (2006) describes as 'disharmony' or the moment when it becomes impossible to respond without thinking. However, emotions can have a variable influence on learning, not always positive (Moon 2006), and this is important to consider when designing service learning opportunities.

The interpersonal nature of learning in Converge activities also underpins the giving and receiving responsibility. This takes into account whether or not one individual is prepared to trust another, potential risks in a situation and the readiness of students to cope (Clouder 2009). Students in Converge were trusted to take responsibility at varying points within their projects. In pre-Converge interviews some students highlighted concerns about possible risks in their forthcoming experiences, but in post-Converge interviews these risks were translated into critical incidents from which students reported learning the most. The incidents created opportunities where students were either handed, or took for themselves, responsibility,

resulting in them feeling ‘in charge’, which in turn enhanced their self-confidence. Clouder (2009) found similar responses from physiotherapy students who were handed responsibility, suggesting that this empowered them in ways that were important for their sense of self. We also found that, to be successful, students must be able to reflect in - as well as on - action, to be able to take account of what is happening around them and subsequently to take action when necessary to maintain coherence in the group.

Reflection is considered a key element of service learning, without which self-development and change may not occur (Chupp and Joseph 2010). However, the findings of our study suggest that even the two students who engaged in Converge on a voluntary basis, and who were not assessed, engaged in a reflective process. These students were engaging in self-selected projects that related to their academic discipline, and they saw the value of the opportunity as a formative moment that would benefit their future learning. Descriptions of their experiences show that reflection occurred through conversation with tutors and with Converge students, as well as being particularly evident through the critical incidents they described. These important learning moments, or as Jarvis (2006, 7) describes them ‘disjunctures’, are an incentive for learning that ‘occurs at the intersection of the inner self and the outer world... usually when the two are in some tension, even dissonance’. This disjuncture stimulates a variety of responses: doing nothing, taking action, reflecting and thinking, responding emotionally, or a combination of the last three. As a consequence, learning causes the individual to be changed, which Jarvis (2006) suggests occurs in three ways: in themselves (mentally, emotionally etc.); in gaining new skills, knowledge, attitudes beliefs; and by becoming more experienced. There were several examples of disjuncture in our findings as follows. Anna had a Converge student in her group who stated he didn’t want to be there, that he was profoundly depressed and suicidal. She described to us how she “found it hard to know how to respond and what to do” but gradually she found the means to cope with his outbursts. Another student portrayed exactly what one of these moments was like when she said:

“At first they (Converge students) were not responding and I didn’t know what to do. At first it panicked me, is it something we had done wrong” (Charlotte)

Other examples are included in the theme ‘learning through encounters in the real world’ (p12-13) where moments of disequilibrium led to discomfort for students, yet when they reflected back, in the interviews, they shared the realisation that those experiences had

been important personal learning moments. Jarvis's view of learning is one that is situated within the social context of an individual's lifeworld. Each of us belongs to groups within which we are familiar, with accepted ways of being and behaving, but when joining new groups we have to consciously learn its sub-culture and this creates a situation of disjuncture and a conscious learning period (Jarvis 2006). Describing this as secondary socialisation, Jarvis (2006) suggests that this leads to change in social and personal identity. The students working in Converge responded to novel and different situations in a variety of ways and subsequently described changes that could be seen as increased self-belief and changed attitudes towards mental health.

Disjuncture can be stimulated by external and/or internal change (Jarvis 2006). In particular, the critical incidents caused externally prompted disjuncture which occurred through happenstance rather than engineered by a teacher. As with other forms of experiential learning, there can be no guarantee about what will (or will not) happen during the process (Desmond and Jowitt 2012). This may depend on how experiential learning is defined and on how constructed the experience is, as opposed to those in the unpredictable 'real world', experiences that Moon (2006) describes as 'slippery'. Where disjuncture is stimulated internally with respect to an individual's values and beliefs, Jarvis (2006, 30) suggests it causes a desire to change, and that through subsequent planning and action:

we turn 'knowledge how' into the confidence of being able to do something and in this sense our learning experience results in considerable changes to self-image as well as the practice of new skills and knowledge.

Such internal changes are identified within our students through their increased confidence about their abilities, their sense of agency, and reconsideration of future career possibilities, as we have described in our theme 'becoming'.

This study has focused on exploring the perceptions of university students, not of Converge students. It is evident from the service learning literature that research to date has primarily been about the student experience and there needs to be a greater consideration of the impact on the community. In recognition of this, a further qualitative study to gather the perspectives of Converge students, about their engagement with the educational opportunities offered is already underway. Converge is based on an assumption that there are reciprocal benefits for both groups, and this further study will aim to explore this.

## Conclusion

Service learning has been framed as pedagogy to counter traditional educational models connecting ‘theory and practice, schools and community, the cognitive and ethical’ (Butin 2010, 3). This holds true for Converge, and we propose the following key elements that, in addition, seem to effectively promote student learning in the projects. Firstly, this involves allowing students the opportunity to be active, and unrestricted, with no particular fixed learning outcomes. Secondly, involvement in the project creates uncertainty and an element of risk, authentic experiences that encourage students to think on their feet and that expose them to the messiness of real-life decision-making (Lombardi 2007, 10). Thirdly, that the relational aspects of Converge opens students’ eyes to learning from the unfamiliar and occurs in a learning situation that is non-hierarchical. Converge creates learning opportunities that incorporate these elements through what we are describing here as a ‘tight-loose structure’. It is a balanced approach that allows students a more extended level of autonomy than in the rest of their academic programme. It is loose enough to give space and freedom for students to think divergently and to experiment with ideas. Supervision by others aims to be just enough to ensure that if situations do arise, an experienced facilitator is able to step in. Illeris (2014, 11), in referring to the work of Taylor and Jarecke (2009), describes transformative learning as ‘leading learners to the edge’. This includes encounters with difference, facing uncertainty and learning in ways that are unpredictable and involve emotion and imagination. Converge was set up to address, in the main, educational inequalities for users of mental health services. As increasing numbers of university students have become involved, the benefits of ‘leading learners to the edge’ have come into focus. This study has enabled us to frame those pedagogic elements that we consider positively use difference and the unfamiliar as a means to promote student learning.

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Table 1 The Participants

	Age	Part time/Full time Undergraduate Postgraduate	Year of study	Subject /discipline	Voluntary/for credit	Converge project
Sophie	20-25	FT UG	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Theatre	For credit	Creating a performance piece for a festival
Jenny	20-25	FT UG	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Theatre	For credit	Creating a performance piece for a festival
Sam	20-25	FT UG	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Dance	Voluntary	Creating a performance piece for a festival
Charlotte	20-25	FT UG	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Dance	Voluntary	Creating a performance piece for a festival
Anna	45-50	FT PG	1 year	Community Psychology	For credit	Teaching a course about happiness
Bernadette	45-50	PT UG	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Fine Art	For credit	Teaching an art course

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