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 sculpt 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

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