

# Virtue and Transformation: A Heuristic of Transforming Learning as a Journey of Deconstruction and Reconstruction

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of transformative learning and virtue epistemology within the context of education for democratic society. Drawing on historical and contemporary scholarship, it is argued that the cultivation of intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility, curiosity, courage and tenacity are essential for fostering the critical thinking and reflective capacities necessary for robust democratic participation. Through theory building and theory testing, a heuristic of transformative learning as a journey of deconstruction and reconstruction, underpinned by intellectual virtues, is presented and substantiated. The empirical component of this paper examines the transformative experiences of former student delegates at the National Student Leadership Forum (NSLF) in Australia, through a mixed-methods retrospective case study. The findings offer a novel framework for researching and discussing transformative learning, and these have unique implications for education in democratic societies, particularly given the post-truth situation which has emerged in recent times.

## Keywords

critical reflection, personal transformation, social transformation

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## Introduction

Democratic society is shaped through citizen participation. Citizens are not mere spectators; they possess the agency to nurture or transform communal life. This right and responsibility depend on healthy public discourse, which in turn requires individuals to be good thinkers and learners (Baehr, 2021). This article explores the epistemological virtues inherent to transformative learning in the context of education for democratic society and proposes that the heuristic: *a journey of deconstruction and reconstruction* is a suitable shorthand framing of learning experiences of this variety. The argument of the paper is structured as follows. First, it discusses the historical background and highlights two intersecting concepts that can inform education within democracies; transformative learning theory and virtue epistemology. Second, through theory building, it presents a case for employing the heuristic to simplify otherwise complex learning phenomena. Third, through theory testing, it examines empirical findings from a recent study in relation to the heuristic and the cultivation of intellectual virtues. Finally, the article concludes by outlining the implications of the study and suggesting possible directions for future research.

### *Democracy, Education, Intellectual Virtue and Transformative Learning*

The relationship between education and democracy has been a focus of debate since at least the time of Aristotle (384–322 BC) and continues within the contemporary era, albeit with growing cynicism (Bergan & Harkavy, 2019; Fraser, 1996; Heggart et al., 2018). Although the concept of democracy can be defined and expressed in a variety of ways, the fundamental idea pertains to a “government based on the consent of the governed” in contradistinction to dictatorship or oligarchy, which are based on “birth, wealth or simple power” (Fraser, 1996, pp. 139–143). In the early 20th century, John Dewey emerged as a leading advocate for the role of education in democratic society, and his work greatly informed scholarship in these fields. Rather than envisioning democracy simply as a governance model, he insisted that citizens ought to play an active role in “building up the common good and the common community” (p. 141).

For Dewey (1940), a fundamental component of realising this goal was to shape education in such a way that it resulted in the cultivation of personal democratic character. This, he contends, is the most powerful tool society has in addressing the various threats against democracy. Citizenship, in this regard, can ultimately be considered an expression of character and of deep-seated personal attitudes which will either strengthen or undermine the conditions for a robust democracy, as one’s personal way of life informs communal existence (p. 3). In this manner, Dewey proposes that education serves a critical function in society by facilitating a training of both character and citizenship. Education can thereby be considered as both a “tool and outcome of democracy” (Hickman, 1996, p. 151), just as democracy in itself is to be experienced both as “end and as means” (Dewey, 1940, p. 4).

The interrelationship between education and democracy is however delicate, with recent concerns for the health of liberal democracies clearly coinciding with declining trust in public educational institutions such as universities (Harkavy & Bergan, 2019; Wells & Grant, 2019). There is also a simultaneous and widespread concern for the destabilising impact of the so-called “post-truth” phenomenon (Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2023; McIntyre, 2018; Wight, 2018) and the need for educational institutions to play a better role in redressing related problems (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020; Bell, 2017; Peters, 2017).

The fundamental issue with the post-truth situation isn’t just the proliferation of misinformation or disinformation, fake news, or alternative facts, but rather people’s capacity or even desire to ascertain what is true or most accurate (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020; Pomerantsev, 2019; Wight, 2018). This raises the obvious and critical question for educational settings: how can we cultivate both students’ *desire* and *capacity* to engage with information and alternative perspectives through reliable epistemic processes and virtuous habits of mind?

There is a broad agreement amongs virtue epistemologists that intellectual virtue involves a commitment to the pursuit of goods like knowledge, understanding, wisdom and truth (Baehr, 2011, 2018; Montmarquet, 1993; Roberts & Wood, 2007; Young, 2012; Zagzebski, 1996). Intellectual virtue, however, requires more than dispositional or motivational elements (a key feature of the responsibilist approach to virtue epistemology); learners also require adequate competencies and rationality as they conduct these pursuits (a key feature of the reliabilist approach to virtue epistemology) (Baehr, 2013). For this reason, good educational initiatives ought to be both *personal* (attentive to learners’ needs and fundamental values and beliefs) and *robust* (attentive to the development of deep understanding of basic principles, underlying causes and how facts in relevant domains hang together) (p. 151).

The relationship between the *personal* and the *robust* elements of learning can however be complex due to our own intuitive predilections. Social psychologists have thoroughly documented our vast propensity for *motivated reasoning* – a process which entails us following our intuitions and then employing our intelligence to rationalise what we want to believe, or to find evidence that supports positions we already hold (Haidt, 2012). In this way, the underlying *personal* elements can compromise the integrity of the *robust* elements of learning. However, the opposite can also be true, for personal dispositions can be a profound driver of robust learning processes. The personal qualities of a good learner and thinker can be described as their intellectual virtues, and these qualities are paramount to circumventing the above-described cul-de-sac of motivated reasoning. Virtues such as intellectual humility, curiosity and open-mindedness help us to acknowledge the limitations of our individual cognition, recognise the flaws in our reasoning and appreciate our dependence on others for the gift of alternative perspectives (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018). Virtues like courage and tenacity help us to overcome the various psycho-social or psycho-emotional challenges that may emerge with questioning, revising or even changing our fundamental ideas, and related values and beliefs. And virtues like autonomy, attentiveness, carefulness and thoroughness can help us overcome the tendency to rationalise our existing

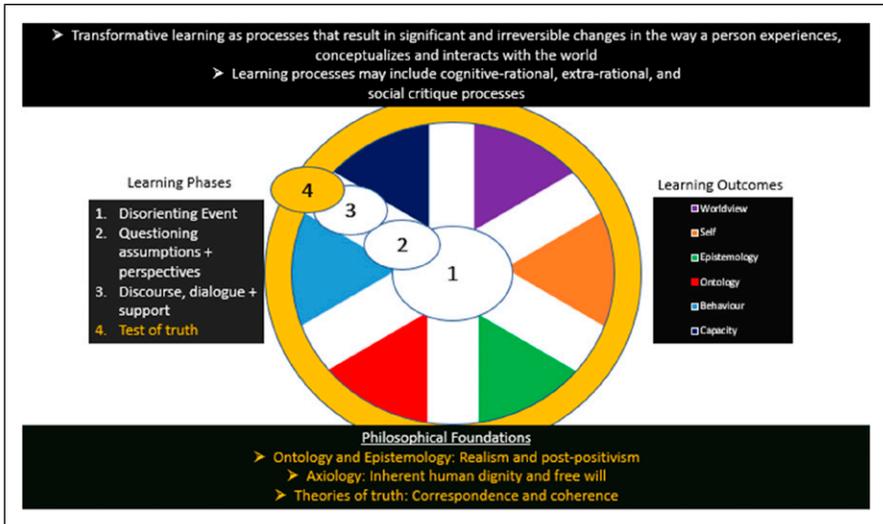
prejudices by strengthening our critical thinking regarding the warrants of competing perspectives (Baehr, 2013, 2018).

Intellectual virtues reflect both the *desire* and *capacity* of good thinkers and learners to pursue outcomes that genuinely matter, at both an individual and societal level. These virtues represent intellectual character strengths which can help us to develop epistemic responsibility and the personal qualities required of productive democratic citizenship (Baehr, 2021). Beyond this instrumental value, intellectual virtues also enhance well-being—both objectively and subjectively—enabling us to navigate personal and professional life with greater fulfillment and effectiveness (Baehr, 2024; Cabrera, 2021; IVA, 2024).

The cultivation of intellectual virtue aligns well with pedagogical initiatives that involve transformative learning, because such processes do not simply build upon previous learning but involve shifting core ontological and epistemological assumptions and beliefs as part of the learning experience ((Mezirow, 2018[2006]). The unique possibilities for fostering both personal reflection and robust forms of critical thinking that can develop civic-minded democratic citizens have been broadly advocated in the scholarship of transformative learning (see, for instance: Akenson et al., 2022; Brookfield, 2012; Cranton, 2016; Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Schugurensky, 2002).

Transformative learning theory can be considered as an analytic metatheory which includes a broad range of similar phenomena (Hoggan, 2016). Definitionally, it may be defined as “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualises, and interacts with the world” (p. 71). These changes can affect a person in relation to their worldview, epistemology, ontology, self, behaviour and capacity (p. 70). In the scholarship of transformative learning, there exists a wide range of views about how such learning outcomes might be achieved and what kind of learning processes may be involved. In pursuit of a unified theory, some scholars have advanced the notion of an integrated model, which includes the three main conceptions of learning processes (Cranton, 2016; Stuckey et al., 2022). The first view emphasises cognitive-rational processes (Mezirow, 1991), the second focuses on extra-rational processes (Dirkx, 1998; Lawrence, 2012; Tisdell, 2000), whilst the third concentrates on processes of social critique (Brookfield, 2000; Freire, 1970). These process domains are not viewed as mutually exclusive as individuals may engage in a transformative learning experience in multiple ways.

Based upon the above-described integrative approach to learning processes, and Hoggan’s (2016) definition of transformative learning and typology of related learning outcomes, I recently developed a reconceptualised model for transformative learning (Roux, 2025a). This conceptualisation (see Figure 1 below) adapts Cranton’s (2016) three-phase model which integrates the learning processes identified above. These include 1: Disorienting event; 2: Questioning assumptions and perspectives; 3: Discourse, dialogue and support (Cranton, 2016, pp. 46–60). This conceptualisation however also includes a fourth phase: *the test of truth*, which is grounded in both coherence and correspondence theories of truth.



**Figure 1.** A reconceptualisation of transformative learning that includes the test of truth (Roux, 2025a).

The *test of truth* entails learners testing the warrants of new or revised ideas, and related values and beliefs, with the truth of any inference consisting “in its agreement with (or correspondence to) reality *and* its coherent fit within a consistent set of beliefs” (Haynes, 1996, p. 189). This aligns with Baehr’s (2013, p. 151) proposition that good education should be both *personal* (attentive to learners’ needs and fundamental values and beliefs) and *robust* (attentive to the development of deep understanding of basic principles, underlying causes and how facts in relevant domains hang together). Further, these adaptations gear the transformative learning experience in pursuit of truth, which actively responds to the associated risks of the post-truth situation in which we find ourselves, and align with the understanding held by virtue epistemologists that intellectual virtue involves a commitment to the pursuit of goods like knowledge, understanding, wisdom and truth (Baehr, 2011, 2018; Montmarquet, 1993; Roberts & Wood, 2007; Young, 2012; Zagzebski, 1996).

## A Case for a Heuristic of Transformative Learning

The above-described learning phenomenon is complex. It draws upon interdisciplinary fields of scholarship and involves a broad set of interconnected learning process and outcome potentialities. It is difficult to summarise and even more difficult to simplify without introducing inaccuracies. The usefulness of the theory for educational research and practice is therefore significantly compromised. The benefit of using a heuristic to explain the overarching transformative learning experience is that it provides a mental

model that can simplify otherwise intricate processes and theoretical concepts. Using a *rule of thumb* or *shorthand* description of the learning experience in this manner does not diminish the importance of underlying concepts but rather provides a starting point to commence deeper explorations.

The inherent risk, however, of creating a mental model is that it can result in cognitive biases that may lead to systematic errors (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). For this reason, it must be emphasised that although the heuristic is drawn from existing literature and concrete empirical insights into transformative learning, the language employed is analogical, representing experiences in an illustrative manner only. In this manner, the heuristic portrays the likeness of one thing to another, in order to make something complex or unfamiliar easier to grasp and communicate.

### *Transformative Learning: A journey of Deconstruction and Reconstruction*

The term *journey* is used in the heuristic because it reflects an experiential *path* to learning that is highly contextualised to the individual's life context, with specific learning outcomes not prescribed nor necessarily attained in a linear or even conclusive fashion. Rather, the learning experience can feel like a meandering, often recursive and lifelong process. The term *journey* is also frequently used by other scholars in the field. For example, Leher (2022) employs it because transformative learning bears some semblance with the archetypical *heroine/hero's journey*, and De Witt and Colleagues (2024) employ it because it highlights that the focus of such learning is "more about the journey than the destination" (p.236). Further, as is also depicted in the findings and discussion sections of this paper, learners themselves often use the term *journey* to describe their own experiences.

The terms *deconstruction* and *reconstruction* are used to express distinct features of a learning journey, although they also warrant further clarification. Various other scholars of transformative learning and related fields have used the terms *deconstruction* and/or *reconstruction* to depict certain components of a learning experience (Albertson, 2014; Avelino & Grin, 2017; Banks, 1995; Erichsen, 2011; Greene, 1971; Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2012; Payne, 2002). Although the terms are often used with specific reference to particular theoretical frameworks (e.g. critical discursive psychology; Albertson, 2014) or epistemological paradigms (e.g. post-structuralism; Charteris, 2014), they can also describe an observed learning experience more generally (e.g. Greene, 1971).

For the purposes of describing an overarching transformative learning journey, I use these terms purely analogically. In this analogy, the journey resembles something akin to a home renovation: the learner breaks things down and then rebuilds so that the home becomes more fit for purpose. In this manner, the learner themselves is like a home, and the learning journey involves deconstructing certain ideas—along with related values and beliefs—before reconstructing them in a way that is more suitable to guide action. Learners may undergo *deconstruction* and *reconstruction* in a variety of ways (including cognitive-rational, extra-rational, and social-critique processes) and the

outcome will ultimately be “significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (Hoggan, 2016, p. 71).

Beyond the benefits of simplification, this heuristic highlights the dual features of a personal learning journey that is geared towards truth and suitable for participatory democracy. Learning is not merely about uncovering *what is not* but about discovering *what is*. The process is not solely about exposing errors, shortcomings, falsehoods or revealing systemic or moral wrongs, but about obtaining valuable knowledge for a better way of life. It represents a shift in learning focus from critique to creation, from breaking things down to building things up, from a negative to a positive. Thus, the heuristic highlights the innate positive potential of transformative learning experiences, as the process ideally empowers the learner to move beyond the metaphorical rubble of deconstruction and towards a robust reconstruction of ideas, and related values and beliefs that are more suitable to guide action in one’s life, both private and public.

It is very important to note at this point that researchers have demonstrated that transformative learning can be highly sensitive in nature and that these experiences do not always lead to personal growth and self-development (Smith & Kempster, 2019). Indeed, it has been argued that there can be a dark side to the process of transformative learning, leading to traumatic outcomes that are far from positive or benign (Morrice, 2012). Dunn (2011) explains that the process of unlearning what we thought we knew to be true and important can be very disturbing and unsettling. Charteris (2014) explains that when our taken for granted assumptions no longer make sense, learners can experience confusion or anxiety (aporia) as part of a period of doubt and perplexity. Cranton (2016) also highlights that learners may grieve the loss of assumptions and beliefs because these deeply personal matters have long informed their lives. Departure from these may leave some people isolated from community and friendships, or their family lives may be adversely affected. There is no doubt that some psycho-social and psycho-emotional risk may be involved with this kind of deep learning (Roux, 2021). The assumption that transformative learning is always positive is not only wrong, but it can also result in unintended or even harmful outcomes. For these reasons, educators cannot be cavalier about initiating this kind of pedagogy, and learner safety, agency, and dignity need to be foregrounded and respected at all times, with an ethical learning environment being actively fostered, and risks appropriately mitigated.

## Research Methodology

The above-described heuristic for transformative learning will now be evaluated against data obtained in a recent study which focused on the delegate experience at the National Student Leadership Forum in Australia (NSLF) (Roux, 2022). Although further details of the study design, methods and findings relating to the learning processes and outcomes can be found in previous publications (Roux, 2022, 2025b), there are several pertinent elements which should be overviewed here. The NSLF (recently renamed *National Leadership Forum* - <https://www.nationalleadershipforum.org.au/>) has been a preeminent leadership development program based in Canberra,

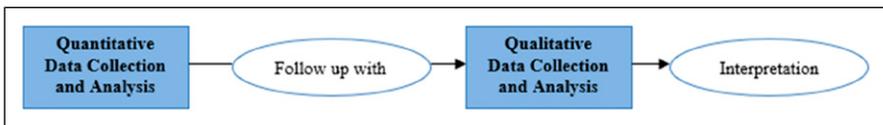
Australia, for over 20 years. This paper will use the moniker NSLF to align with the time period of the study. Each year, about 150 diverse participants (18–26 years of age) attend from universities around Australasia. The four-day immersive event, colloquially known as “the Forum,” is hosted in part at Parliament House in Canberra, whilst also including a range of experiential and service-learning activities that allow exposure to a range of perspectives, personal narrative building, and reflection.

This mixed-methods retrospective case study used an explanatory sequential design, incorporating surveys and semi-structured interviews to explore learning experiences (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007) (see Figure 2). This methodology prioritizes the qualitative phase over the quantitative phase (p. 86) and adapts interview questions based on survey data for in-depth exploration. Data were acquired using an adapted validated survey tool contiguous with the study (Stuckey et al., 2013), whilst the interviews were completed via Zoom, transcribed, and the results were analysed using thematic analysis (Peel, 2020). This included foregrounding the participants’ experience and creating rich descriptions that emanated from transcription extracts, thus using participants’ own words to inform the classification of data into units of analysis (p.3). In this manner, propositions were developed based on interpretations that were formed by the data and informed by the literature in a contextualised manner (p. 9–10).

Participants were recruited with the support of the NSLF Board using non-probability purposive sampling to gain insights into the transformative experiences of specific former delegates (Punch, 2009). Importantly, the study does not attempt to correlate general participation at the NSLF event with transformative learning. Rather, former delegates were invited to participate *only if* they regarded their experience as personally transformative, defined as “resulting in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (Hoggan, 2016, p. 71). A total of 20 participants were recruited, including 11 men and 9 women.

## Research Findings and Discussion

This paper discusses only the results relevant to developing a heuristic for transformative learning. Although survey data informed the interviews, all data reviewed below are drawn from the interview transcripts. The following table depicts the theme and codes developed as part of the study’s conceptual framework. These were tested against the collected data, and the example words, phrases, and sentences illustrate how participants’ learning experiences matched the coding schema.



**Figure 2.** Explanatory sequential design based on Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007, p. 69).

Theme	Codes	Example words/phrases/sentences from data
Transformative journey	Deconstruction	“break down,” “unpack,” “unlearn,” “explore,” “understand,” “awareness,” “realisation,” “recognise,” “take a step back,” “take some time,” “reflect,” “journey of trying to deconstruct self and really find authenticity and genuineness,” “Lies,” “façades,” “empty air,” “mystery,” “veil had been lifted,” “seeing for the first time,” “woke up,” “naïve to the fact,” “narrow-minded”
	Reconstruction	“rebuild,” “rediscover,” “relearn,” “find,” “truth,” “authenticity,” “genuineness,” “deal,” “own,” “sharpen up,” “clarity,” “make a choice,” “changed my perspective,” “grow,” “comprehend,” “a better way,” “shed the baggage,” “cemented”

### Codes: Deconstruction and Reconstruction

Although these features were coded separately as part of the data analysis, I present them together here to demonstrate how *deconstruction* necessarily precedes *reconstruction* and how the learning journey may progress and recur over many years. The following interview extracts also demonstrate the diversity of learning processes involved and the wide range of vocabulary participants employed to describe this deconstructive and reconstructive experience, and how certain intellectual virtues are evident as part of the learning process. The student learning processes and outcomes are explored in more detail in Roux (2025b), and all names are pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality. A common theme in participants’ storylines is that when their biographical repertoire was insufficient to make sense of their experience, they developed a distinct and intense learning disposition to re-establish personal harmony. Jarvis (2006, p. 78) describes the impulse to overcome this “sense of disjuncture” as the greatest motivation for learning one can experience.

In the surveys and interviews, participants described feelings associated with a sense of disjuncture with phrases like, “I was reflecting on a relative incapacity of my own” (Lachy), “I didn’t realise how conflicted my whole outlook was” (Harry), or “I was starting to realise, like, ‘Hey, this isn’t actually how I feel about it. These aren’t my thoughts that I’m saying; these are someone else’s thoughts’” (Beth). The following participant described how he was reconsidering why he valued doing certain things: “Like am I just wasting my time? I was like, ‘I’m not sure anymore’” (Francis). Francis explained how discussing his story at NSLF helped him to “to see it from another person’s eyes.” He continues:

I guess breaking those down was difficult, particularly as you confront those different aspects of your life more head on than you had thought because you’d just sort of cruising

through life and then not critically thinking about them. And then think about what has influenced your perception about how the world is and how you interact with it... breaking things down and looking at some of these different aspects of my life individually... trying to learn some lessons from that.

Francis also described how he felt he needed to “step away” and “rebuild myself.” When asked what this experience involved, he explained that he had to “assess” how these lessons applied to him going forward. The core ideas of *deconstruction* and *reconstruction* are evident in Francis’s reflections on the transformative experience; this is made especially clear through his use of descriptive phrases such as “breaking things down,” “stepping away,” “assessing” and “rebuilding.” For Francis, much of the learning centred around the concept of his own identity. It was highly *personal*, but it was also *robust*. He continued:

And as I was starting to think about that more, because part of the questions, they were probing questions also, but very thought provoking and very essential... I came to the conclusion I think I had transformed myself into the expectations of what people wanted me to be in those positions rather than me bringing myself wholly into that, like making it mine... I felt I hid that away behind a shield... NSLF has changed the way in which I think and approach life.

Inherent to this journey of change is a range of personal qualities that reflect Francis’ intellectual virtues. For instance, it is clear that he exhibits *intellectual humility* by recognising the limits of his own understanding, and in his ability to recognise where his previous ways of thinking had not been critically evaluated. His desire to “learn lessons” reflects his *curiosity*, and his *intellectual autonomy* is demonstrated by his ability to recognise and shift away from operating in accordance with the expectations of others and to embody his own way (“making it mine”) in a critically considered manner. Finally, his *intellectual courage* is evident in his ability to “confront” aspects of his life “head on” and to give them critical thought.

Bobby described the learning journey of discovering what made her into the person she was as something similar to investigating a “deep mystery,” “something untouched and untapped.” She said that it “was incredibly powerful because it kind of pierced light into those dark places.” She explained how she realised that when it came to her beliefs, she had been “riding on the coattails” of her mother. Hearing other people’s stories, and telling her own, she realised that she needed to discover if she “really did have a faith” and how she needed “sharpening up” when it came to understanding what she valued and why. She described how she needed to “step away” and “make a choice for my own self.”

Throughout this journey of change, she explained how she explored things, learnt to understand and own her wrongs, forgive herself and others, and how she found clarity in her beliefs. The movement from “deep mystery” to “clarity” involved the familiar pattern that resembles *deconstructing* why things were as they were, assessing the

validity of certain ideas, values and beliefs, and then *reconstructing* her approach to life based on her own critical reflections and the confidence she attained in the process. Again, the intellectual virtues inherent in this *personal* and *robust* process are striking. She displayed *intellectual autonomy* as she began to consolidate views of her own, she displayed *curiosity* and as she explored areas that were mysterious and untapped, and she demonstrated her *intellectual carefulness* as she sought accuracy and clarity, recognising her own shortcomings along the way with *intellectual humility*. Further, her disposition towards learning also clearly changed in the process, she states:

The [NSLF] experience awakened a hunger for truth in my own life of my past and present experiences. What did I think of that? How has that shaped me, what did I learn or observe in it? It was not an overnight change but I learnt to love questions.

Paul also described how the Forum was a “hugely transformative” experience for him. He stated that it (the learning experience) “bears its fruit in its time—you know, when it comes to a future learning situation. I have a method of unlearning things, of unpacking things, of exploring things that I didn’t have before.” He provided a detailed explanation of how he subsequently had to “relearn” things and how this journey played out recursively over time in various different life-contexts, including his marriage, and in his role as a father. He stated:

One of the things that happens when you tell your story in the small group - is that you’re forced to think about who you are, right, as you tell that story. What made me this way? Why am I this way? And sometimes, even as you tell your story, it’s defining. It was the first moment of me telling my story outside of my family, of being able to put words to those events and kind of unpack them and to be listened to and heard and loved and known that in that space.

That - that kind of experience at the Forum was - that was the transformation. That was the start of the turning point. Now having been on a journey of - circa 20 years into that, I can definitely point back, though, and say that was when it started.

Paul explained in detail how the “unpacking” worked when you “show up as yourself” and “authentically arrive” in a given space. Paul asserted that this must be a safe space (which the NSLF was for him), and this allowed him to recognise that his life’s experience as a victim of severe domestic violence had given him a “bad data set.” It was upon broadening his perspectives and learning from others that he realised that his personal experience of a father was actually a “terrible example,” a “warped” and “biased sample,” and that “fathers are not like that.” This enabled him to “give up,” “get rid of” and “throw away” that experience as a reference point for truth about men in authority. From here, he embraced alternative or “better examples” from which to “take some data” and to build “new experiences with them.” Although the vocabulary employed by Paul is different from Francis’ in relation to the notions of *deconstruction*

and *reconstruction*, the sentiment of unlearning and re-learning seems to be essentially the same.

One of the many striking aspects of the interview with Paul was his remarkable *attentiveness* to the detail of data points that he was drawing upon for reasoning, his *open mindedness* to alternative life-stories, and his *intellectual carefulness* in handling the information—sifting slowly through what was unhelpful and what was valuable. I was also struck by his tremendous *intellectual courage* in exploring highly personal matters with rigour and honesty both in his small group at the NSLF and with me as an unknown researcher 20 years later.

Harry explicitly referred to his learning experiences as a “journey of trying to deconstruct self and really find authenticity and genuineness.” Even though he did not use the term *reconstruction*, his narrative clearly suggests that this experience consisted of embracing “truth” in order to move beyond “lies,” “facades” and “empty air.” Harry used the word “naked” to illustrate just how exposed and vulnerable he felt while telling his story at the NSLF. He also explained that it felt like a “sledgehammer in my gut, like I just felt like, ‘Whoa, what just happened?’.” He continued “and then I was like, oh, man, I have no freaking clue who I am. And I have no clue, like my convictions don’t have any kind of substantive of depth to them.” These statements are a clear reflection of Harry’s *intellectual humility* during the NSLF experience. Harry described that during his small group sessions he realised that the “only authentic part of me, that I actually felt like, ‘Yeah, that’s genuinely me’” was the part of him that was a “confused, kind of unprocessed, traumatised self” and that this was “pretty, like gutting.” Using vivid imagery, Harry explained:

It was like lifting a kind of hatch and just seeing like an absolutely mess of wires and being like, ‘I don’t know what’s connected to what, and I don’t know what this does at all. Like what is this good for?’

Harry’s *curiosity* and *intellectual thoroughness* in asking hard questions of himself and actively seeking explanations is clearly evident. The critical next step in his learning journey also involved drawing on the virtue of *intellectual courage* as he responded proactively to what he had just learnt about himself at the NSLF. He subsequently decided to move in with some other like-minded men “who were all kind of on the same journey of trying to, like, deconstruct self and really find authenticity and genuineness.” He explained the difficulties of the transformative journey in the following way: “It is a tough process. And, you know, you don’t make fire without rubbing two sticks together, like you need friction. You need someone to get into you – like up into a grill. You need places of uncomfartability.” The virtue of *tenacity* is also evident in his attitude and actions, and it demonstrates how these personal qualities enabled him to persist through a difficult learning experience. A process which Harry said, “changed me.”

Jack similarly described the personal empowerment he experienced and displayed remarkably similar intellectual virtues along the way. He explained how he realised the

immense “value of knowing who you are. And you can’t do that without thinking through that... dealing with the things I went through.” Like Harry, the first part of Jack’s journey seemed to centre on deepened self-awareness and understanding, while the second part of the process involved working through personal challenges in order to “overcome sort of situations and become a better person.” The general pattern of breaking things down to understand them, and then building things up in a healthier way, is once again evident in this narrative.

Beth explained how at the Forum she felt like, “Whoa, my mind is blown. I don’t even know who I am.” She continued, “It is like, ‘What is happening?’... it was a lot to take in!” She reflected that prior to the Forum, “my assumptions and reactions to things were based upon my family.” The experience made her reflect on her life and upbringing, and about “what I truly value, when I sit down and think about.” She began “recognising...so many different layers” and could see that she was “hanging on to these different awful things that have happened.” For Beth, it was like a “veil had been lifted” and she was “seeing for the first time.” This began a process of “knowing myself again, like someone I thought I had lost.” She explained how she had to “take a step back” and consider exactly “how I want to do it... going forward... So [that] really pushed me to have some difficult conversations with each of my parents on kind of things that have happened... I think that’s hugely made my relationships.”

By employing descriptive concepts like “unveiling,” “seeing,” and “stepping back,” she depicts activities associated with *deconstruction* by re-assessing her “deep core beliefs and values.” This part of her transformative journey is clearly contrasted to a subsequent period of *reconstruction*, which was described with concepts like “finding” and “knowing” and “moving forward.” The inherent attributes or intellectual virtues of *intellectual autonomy*, *carefulness* and *courage* are also clearly evident in her story, especially in dealing with the difficulties associated with her upbringing and discussing those issues directly with her parents. She explained how the NSLF experience changed the way she now engages with others, by giving her a new “framework” for interpreting experiences, and thereby helping her to “dig deeper” rather than just having “superficial conversations.” Through a new understanding of the complexity of the world and people’s lives, she is now “seeking first to understand what’s going on before coming to some sort of conclusion.” These statements provide insights into how the transformative learning experience supported the cultivation of both her *desire* and *capacity* to engage with alternative perspectives through reliable epistemic processes and virtuous habits of mind.

The contributions of the remaining participants echoed those already explored in depth above. To avoid extending beyond the point of data saturation, I will conclude this section with a couple of final examples of how the distinct features of *deconstruction* and *reconstruction* are consistently evident in participants’ narratives and how *intellectual virtues* clearly underpinned the learning process. Edward described how his small group experience made him realise that the “world is much more complex” and that “I was quite polarised in one way.” He stated that the impact of this realisation “really changed my perspective on the world” and he “became much less sure of

everything” because he could now see “how much I had to learn.” This commenced a shift in him, as he began a journey to “grow... and comprehend things in a better way.” Again, the language is subtle; however, the phases of unpacking and recognising unwarranted beliefs and replacing them with “better”, more informed beliefs is evident, and so are his various personal qualities such as *intellectual humility* and *open mindedness*.

Nicole explained how the “Forum really helped break down literally parts of who I was.” It was through conversations that explored her personal story that she “could actually, kind of shed off the baggage I was carrying.” When asked how she was able to shed the baggage, she described how it was like she “woke up and started the process,” which was a long and relentless pursuit of a single goal:

I’ve explored everything. I’ve kind of gone to the far end of things, like I’ve explored everything... So I like had to push and push and push... I wanted to know the truth. I wanted to know the truth.

Similar to Harry and Fabio, she made some drastic changes in her life, moved overseas and began exploring alternative ways of thinking and being in the world. After a number of years of active searching, she reflected how “it was the most powerful experience. It’s just like pure joy. And I felt light, I felt so energised. I can’t describe the feeling, but I knew that I’d made a really powerful change.” The descriptive phrase “break down” is juxtaposed with the adoption of new understandings that were based on explorations of truth. Although she did not use the words “build up,” the juxtaposition makes it clear that her transformative journey involved both *deconstructive* and *reconstructive* features. Again, her disposition towards learning through *curiosity*, *open-mindedness* and *intellectual tenacity* in the pursuit of the truth is evident.

## Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate that participants repeatedly described their experience of transformative learning in ways consistent with activities associated with a *journey of deconstruction* and *reconstruction*. When these terms are considered analogically (e.g. a home renovation) and as a *short-hand* way of depicting various intricate learning processes and outcomes, we can conclude that the heuristic suitably aligns with theoretical foundations in the existing literature, and is consistent with the empirical data in this study. Furthermore, when learners sought to explain the transformative experiences they underwent, they naturally did so using analogies that align with this particular heuristic. This does not entail that there are no other suitable heuristics and related analogies that can depict such learning experiences; however, it does provide a useful starting point for further exploration.

Across the various participant narratives portrayed in this study, it is also clear that the learners exhibited a range of intellectual virtues as part of their transformative learning experience. These naturally varied, depending on each individual’s unique

biographical repertoire and situatedness; however, their reflections suggest that intellectual virtue was both an integral part of the learning process and a valuable outcome of it. Given the relationship between intellectual virtues and democratic character (Baehr, 2021), this also aligns with the Dewey's (1940) proposition that the development of democratic character can be seen as both a means and an end of education.

The implications of these findings are significant. First, in light of declining trust in democracy and higher education, and the rise of the post-truth era, this study highlights how transformative learning initiatives are underpinned by the cultivation of intellectual virtues and how such experiences can be geared towards the pursuit of truth through both *personal* and *robust* learning. In this way, transformative approaches to education can be seen as a distinctly valuable response to instances of motivated reasoning and the broader challenges of the post-truth context in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). Second, the heuristic of transformative learning provides a simplified framing for scholars, educators, and those promoting transformative learning initiatives. It helps communicate complex research concepts to stakeholders and makes profound learning experiences more conceptually accessible to educators and learners alike. Anecdotally, I have found that using this heuristic—along with the home renovation analogy—has been helpful for people navigating disorienting experiences, bringing greater cognitive awareness and giving learners a stronger sense of agency and direction during what can be an unsettling time.

Finally, the study provides a novel framework for advancing transformative learning research. The heuristic – *a journey of deconstruction and reconstruction* – could benefit from further theoretical analysis to strengthen its foundations and to ensure that it is neither overly simplistic nor flawed. Additionally, empirically evaluating the validity of the heuristic across broader learning contexts, as well as its practical utility in scholarly and educational settings, would be beneficial.

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