## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to document the process of transformative learning during students’ internships.

**Design / methodology/ approach:** A qualitative study was done on 13 interviewed students to gain deeper insights into their learning experiences during their internships.

**Findings:** The study found numerous trigger events resulting in mindset shifts in students during their internships. The conclusion drawn is that trigger events and enabling resources and external support are central to healthy mindset shifts and learning.

**Originality / Value:** This paper provides important guidance for supporting transformative learning during student internships.

**Keywords:** Workplace learning, transformative learning, trigger events, learning orientation, mindset shifts

## Introduction

Transformative learning in workplace research is gaining much attention, as business

environments are increasingly becoming more complex and uncertain than ever before (e,g., Kwon et al., 2020). Given the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous environment, employees joining the workforce are expected to think independently, initiate new ideas, and constantly develop themselves to serve organizational goals. This requires employees to come out of their comfort zone and transform. However, historically, the topic on learning at work has been focused on skill acquisition and delivery (e.g., Ellinger, 2005; Hager, 1998; Noe et al., 2010; Franz, 2010). This piece of research aims to investigate the process of transformative learning in the workplace in the context of student internships. As students enter the workforce for the first time, many will be confronted with novel situations that may challenge their pre-existing worldviews, assumptions and behaviours, thus enabling transformative learning (e.g., Kasworm, & Bowles, 2012). Thus, we chose the context of student internships to examine this topic of transformative learning in the workplace, in particular, focusing on the trigger events that may enable transformative learning and individual orientations that may increase the likelihood of transformative learning.

**Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning refers to the process of acquiring new knowledge, perspectives, and beliefs that fundamentally change an individual’s worldview and self-identity (e.g., Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2018). According to both Mezirow (2000) and Taylor (2018), transformative learning typically occurs when individuals encounter experiences or information that challenge their existing beliefs. It also occurs when they engage in self-reflection or dialogue with others who hold different perspectives. This process can be both personal and social, as individuals confront their own assumptions, biases and cultural norms and social structures that shape their understanding of reality. Key elements of transformative learning include triggering events or disorienting dilemmas, which disrupt individual’s existing beliefs and prompt them to question their assumptions; critical reflection, where individuals engage in a thoughtful examination of experiences and beliefs; and active experimentation, in which individuals actively seek out new perspectives and test new ideas in order to integrate them into their worldview (Mezirow, 2000).

**Transformative Learning During Internships**

**Role of Trigger Events**

Trigger events refer to discrete occurrences that are often thought of as negative or traumatic in nature (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May & Walumbwa (2005). While trigger events can spur growth and development, Avolio (2005) has suggested that events that are not explicitly negative, including challenges at work where employees encounter information that challenges core beliefs, are also likely to facilitate growth and development. In their research regarding authentic leadership development, Gardner et al. (2005) identified seminal experiences as trigger events, which refer to the “sometimes (internal and external) subtle changes in the individual’s circumstances that facilitate personal growth and development” (p. 347). Within the domain of internships and workplace learning, challenging experiences are a key input in the process of developing individual skills (e.g., McCall et al., 1988; Ohlott, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1994). This is because challenging experiences and trigger events provide a platform for individuals to try new behaviors, reframe old ways of thinking and acting. When faced with challenging task situations, individuals are forced to think critically about the situation, identify underlying causes and consequences of problems, and process new and ambiguous information (Cox & Cooper, 1998; Jacobs and Jacques, 1987). When presented with challenging interpersonal situations, individuals must experiment with new ways of working with and influencing other people.

**The Role of Trigger Events in Transformative Learning**

Trigger events can play a significant role in facilitating transformative learning experiences. First, trigger events may serve as disorienting dilemmas (e.g., Mezirow, 2000) that challenge individuals’ existing beliefs and assumptions, prompting them to actively seek new knowledge, perspectives, or ways of thinking to resolve the dilemma and alleviate the dissonance. Second, trigger events can also evoke strong emotions, such as shock, surprise, fear, or awe, making a deep impression on individuals (e.g., Mezirow, 2000; Riechard, 2015). This emotional arousal can motivate individuals to reevaluate their current beliefs and consider alternative viewpoints, leading to transformative shifts in their understanding. Trigger events can also prompt individuals to engage in reflection and introspection to analyze their own assumptions, biases and worldview, making space for new insights and perspectives to emerge (e.g., Mezirow, 2000; Reichard, 2015, Fortune, 2019).

While the above mentioned role of trigger events on transformative learning focuses on individual processes, a supportive environment, such as a psychologically safe learning space can enhance the transformative potential of trigger events (e.g., Kasworm and Bawles, 2012). Supportive environments can provide the necessary resources, guidance, and opportunities for individuals to process and integrate their experiences, leading to transformative shifts in their thinking.

**Focus of This Research**

While much research has documented the role of trigger events in the development of skills and competencies (e.g., Gardner et al., 2005; McCall et al., 1998; Reichard et al., 2015), the research on how trigger events during internships spur transformative learning is sparse and lacking in the extant literature. Moreover, it is unclear what are the key components of triggering events within the context of mindset shifts.

Given this backdrop, our research questions are as follows:

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of an internship experience, and more specifically, a trigger event?

Research Question 2: What is the process by which such an event may result in transformative learning?

## Methodology

**Context**

Students undergoing the Full-Time Bachelor’s in Human Resource Management Degree Programme in a Singaporean university have to undergo a mandatory 6-month internship. They will be evaluated by supervisors in the middle of the 6 month internship, and at the end of the 6 month internship. At the same time, throughout the six months, they will be required to submit a weekly reflection, and a final report at the end of the internship.

**Data Collection Procedure**

We randomly sampled 13 students from the internship programme and conducted virtual interviews via zoom which lasted for around 1 hour each. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

**Data Analysis Procedure**

As described throughout the results section that follows, we conducted an iterative coding process. First, 3 coders, including 2 authors of the paper and a research assistant, independently reviewed all participant responses in their weekly reflections and interviews and generated initial emergent themes. They then met to discuss initial themes and examples of participant responses. It should be noted that both authors coded data and identified themes at each stage of thematic analysis in an effort to improve reliability. This is common in qualitative analysis (Guest et al., 2012). After the determination of the final themes, the two authors independently coded all responses one final time on the themes identified. Final coding resulted in high interrater reliability. The two authors completed the analysis by arranging the final themes in a theoretical model. The process of coding was done with the aid of Nvivo 12.

**Procedures and Results of Thematic Analysis**

The first steps in the thematic analysis are to become familiar with the data and begin identifying initial themes to describe the developmental experiences of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, 2 authors and a research assistant thoroughly reviewed all responses independently and then came together to discuss the initial themes. During the discussion, there was a heavy focus on identifying (a) the emergent characteristics of experiences, and (b) the processes by which these characteristics relate to transformative learning. Results from this phase of thematic analysis rendered the following initial themes regarding internship experiences, depicted in the table below which we used as a coding guide in other rounds of coding:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Category of Theme | Specific Themes |
| Developmental Challenges that were perceived to be trigger events | Task-related challenges  Interpersonal -related challenges  Environmental Challenges  Personal challenges |
| Learning Process | Self-directed learning  Learning by doing  Learning by observation  Seeking information, advise and feedback |
| External Support | Supportive colleagues  Supportive supervisor |
| Process of transformation | Reflection  Experimenting with new behavior  Experimenting with new mindsets and perspectives |
| Outcome of learning | Learning content  Learning skills  Learning about the self |

Table : Initial Themes

For example, the emergent themes of task-related challenges were observed in the following quotation from student 15:

“I remember when I first joined, I was quite shocked at the excel file that they use, cause it’s so big… and then when I zrealized I actually had to brush up on my excel skills, because the school… I mean the school does have excel courses which we did take up, but definitely did not prepare me adequately for the working world, I think.”

An example of self-directed learning is apparent in the following quote by student 42: “I went to learn a lot online.”

An example of reflection is reflected in the following quote by student 53 who reflected on how he was engaging with others due to a rocky start in recruiting people for his company: “This caused me to reflect on the way I was engaging with these people”.

Finally, a quote to reflect experimenting with new mindsets and perspective comes from student 53: “I just needed to do some cognitive restructuring. I just don’t see—I don’t take it as a negative thing: how come this company is not prepared, is not competent. It is more of like, I will just think of this as a learning experience, to try to just learn as much as possible from this experience”.

Next, the first author and research assistant independently coded the data using the initial emergent themes and met to discuss the results. During this discussion, they followed the process of thematic analysis by engaging in data reduction – collapsing the data into more succinct labels to create initial categories for the data, and data compilation – making inferences about the meaning of that data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As such, they eliminated the categories of personal challenges (due to lack of occurrence). Experimenting with new behavior (due to lack of occurrence), learning about the content (due to lack of occurrence).

**Summary of Presence of Themes in Each Student’s Qualitative Data**

The two authors coded the weekly reflections and interviews of the 13 students sampled. The “x” in the table below denotes the presence of the theme. As we can see from the table below, almost all students approached their internship with a learning orientation and mindset. Almost all students experienced shifts in mindsets and knowledge about the self. However, different students experienced different types of challenges and also exhibited different levels of psychological strength. The presence of psychological safety, social support and supportive supervisor also varied amongst students. Different students also had varying engagements with the trigger events, with some asking questions and seeking information and advice, while others did not.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme** | S12 | S15 | S34 | S42 | S48 | S53 | S60 | S68 | S70 | S75 | S86 | S95 | S98 |
| Task  Challenges |  | **x** |  | **x** |  |  | **x** |  | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |
| Interpersonal  Challenges |  |  |  | **x** |  |  | **x** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Environmental Challenges | **x** |  | **x** | **x** |  | **x** |  |  | **x** |  |  |  |  |
| Psychological Strength |  |  | **x** | **x** |  | **x** | **x** | **x** |  |  |  | **x** |  |
| Learning orientation | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** | **x** |
| Psychological  Safety |  | **x** |  |  | **x** |  | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** |
| Social Support |  | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** |  | **x** |  |  |  |  |
| Supportive supervisor |  | **x** |  |  |  |  | **x** |  | **x** |  | **x** |  | **x** |
| Asking questions | **x** | **x** |  | x |  |  | **x** | **x** |  | **x** | **x** |  | **x** |
| Seeking information and advice | **x** | **x** |  | **x** |  | **x** | **x** |  | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** |
| Reflecting | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |
| Shifts in mindset | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** | **x** |
| New knowledge about self | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** | **x** | **x** | **x** |  | **x** |  |  |

Table : Summary of Coded Qualitative

**Theoretical Model of Transformational Learning During Internship**

After the revision of the initial themes, we sought to address the second research question and continued the systematic process of thematic analysis by considering the relationships between and relevance among different themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) toward developing a preliminary theoretical model of transformative learning, especially in the domain of transformative learning during internships. The two authors coded all data independently using revised emergent themes. This phase of thematic analysis is akin to axial coding in grounded theory. This involved relating initial themes, or categories, from open coding to sub-categories around the “axis of a category” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 123). Table 2 summarizes the results from the coding.

We also refined the themes identified in Step 2 by identifying categories, breaking them into subcategories, and drafting a model of how each theme fits together. The purpose of this step was to begin identifying an initial framework of the process by which trigger events may result in transformative learning, thereby addressing research question 2. The two major results of the axial coding were : 1) a theoretical model of the role of trigger events in accelerating transformative learning, and 2) one’s level of engagement with the trigger emerged as a central category.

As noted and shown in Figure 1, a trigger event is defined as challenges faced during the internship. The challenge could be task-related, or challenges relating to interpersonal challenges. Environmental challenges refer to the uncertainty or ambiguity that the student faces during an internship. This could be the general culture of the organization or the lack of clear directions and roles provided to students. Exposure to a trigger event results in more or less transformative learning by operating through a student’s level of engagement with the trigger event such as by asking questions, seeking information or feedback or reflecting. In other words, the behaviors of asking questions, seeking information or feedback or reflecting mediate the relationship between the trigger event and transformative learning.

There is also a two-way relationship between engagement with the trigger event and enabling resources. First, individuals with higher learning orientation (approaching the internship with a clear focus on learning), psychological strengths such as resilience, social support and supportive supervisors are more likely to engage in trigger events by asking questions, seeking information and engaging in reflection. At the same time, the behaviors of asking questions, seeking information and advice can activate social support and a supportive supervisor.

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Figure : Model of Transformative Learning During Internships

**Key Findings: Outcome of Transformative Learning via Internship**

**Finding 1: Trigger events are essential for personal growth and development**

In support of our model that trigger events facilitate transformative learning, student 75 articulated in the interview that trigger events and stress lead to personal growth and development with regard to the negative feedback he received: “But at the same time, I do have the drive to work on it, which is why initially it stresses me out, but I would say it’s a good stress, because sometimes when you don’t feel stress, you don’t develop, you don’t grow also. Yah, I take that positively, and I just continue. I did improve a lot, la basically”.

Student 12 reflected on the task-related and interpersonal challenges during the internship and articulated the following on how these challenges spurred her growth: “ I mean, of course, when it’s a bit difficult, I mean I think it’s human nature to want to give up, but I guess I learned I really could push through, which I’m glad because the learning outcome is really tremendous at the end of the day. So, I guess that’s one big thing I’ve learned, like even if I think that the limit is just like that, there’s always room to grow”.

With regards to facing the working world for the first time, and dealing with the pressures that come with it, student 68 noted: “So in terms of growth, I’m definitely growing in terms of like—I would consider this as my first ever proper work experience. In terms of growth, yes. Understanding the difference between school life and the workforce—how you deal with pressure is different. I mean, in school, it’s just, your assignments and what's not right—but in work, there’s a different level of pressure there and how you actually deal with pressure. And eventually understanding that this is just how it is—, that’s just life. In terms of growth, I would say, I learnt more about how I can deal with pressure, how I can deal with different people, how we actually find a balance to work with everyone—all these are part of growth in terms of, like, in the corporate world, this is how it works, this is the adulting part of life”.

**Finding 2: Through the internship, students experienced mindset shifts, cognitive restructuring**

One of the key findings of this research is that on top of acquiring new knowledge and skills, students experienced mindset shifts and cognitive restructuring, all components of transformative learning.

With regards to going into the internship experience, student 34 said the following:

Generally, I was excited. But I think, like, expectations are very bad for you. I did have to—you know, alter my mindset to tell myself that I have to be adaptable and flexible because it might not be what they say it is. Mindset is very important as well”, demonstrating her ability to alter her expectations so that she may have a more pleasant internship experience.

In terms of mindset shifts during the tasks itself, here is what student 53 said about his role in calling and recruiting people for the company he was interning at: “This caused me to reflect on the way I was engaging these people. Previously, I was viewing recruitment as a checklist of questions to ask, without considering the importance of establishing any emotional connection with them. Thus, I did not really care whether they showed up for interviews and such. My job was merely to call people and schedule interviews. Naturally, this also impacted the recruitment numbers and I needed to amend my approach and mindset”.

In fact, one student (student 53) explicitly articulated the cognitive restructuring he undertook to make the most of what he deems an incompetent company: “I just needed to do some cognitive restructuring, I guess. I just don’t see—I don’t take it as a negative thing: how come this company is like, like this, not prepared, is not competent. Is more of like, I will just think of this as a learning experience, to try and get—anyway it’s 6 months kind of thing, so in 24 weeks or so… so just learn as much as possible from this experience”.

Student 34 also reflected on how she had to undergo a mindset shift to overcome her personal shortcomings of being overly emotional: “So some of the mindset shifts that I made was, that I had to take just whatever I get. Because I’m a pretty emotional person, so I will try to—you know, I have to understand that it’s a professional workplace, so some of the adjustments I had to do also, and I had to react accordingly. It’s not within my control; it’s not up to me as well. So that was something else”.

Interestingly, on top of just engaging in mindset shifts, student 70 noted the importance of coupling a learning mindset with actions : “Don’t just have the mindset that you're there to learn. Really go there to learn, and then, like you perform, because only when you start performing, then you can really learn the whole process”.

Beyond the mindset shifts mentioned above, many students also said that they learned how to take an organizational perspective on top of their own narrow individual perspective. Student 75 articulated that: “I have also started to think more from an organization perspective”.

**Finding 3: Students had to learn how to be more adaptable and flexible**

Another key theme that stood out was the need for them to be more adaptable and flexible in their thinking and behaviours:

In student 34’s weekly reflection, she reflected on her internship and wrote: “However. I feel like this can be a good experience in teaching me to be flexible and adaptable”. Student 42 also shared that she learned how to adjust her mindset and how she interacts with her boss:

At the start, I had a lot of panic attacks and stuff. But then, towards the end, I kind of adapted to his working style. You know, like, don’t step onto his tail, that kind of thing. So, I learn how to avoid, and navigate my way. Yeah, so I adapted into that”.

During the interview, student 68 mused that it all boiled down to adaptability and flexibility: “But when we actually enter the workforce and start working in a company, that’s when all the practicality kicks in. Not everything that we’ve learnt would apply, not everything that we understand would fit into the particular company, the particular role. So it’s all about adaptability and like, knowing how to be flexible”.

In fact, student 60 shared that she had to let go of her own ways of doing things and adapt to her supervisor and colleague: “I would think it’s challenging because it's—What's that word? It’s like fighting against myself. Yeah. So it's like I really wanted to do it my way. But I feel like, given my role as an intern, you know, I am there to learn. My role there is to learn, and so I should be more adaptable to changes”. Relatedly, student 40 also mentioned: “Because sometimes change can be quite challenging for people. So if you’re prepared for change, it will be better”.

**Finding 4: Students gained deeper self-understanding via the internship experience**

Overall, students also gained deeper understanding of themselves via the internship experience. A frequently cited learning was on how they were stronger or more resilient than they thought they were, before going into the internship. As student 60 noted: “I feel that I might be a stronger individual than I thought I would be”.

Other students learned about their personal shortcomings and reflected on how they could overcome them. For instance, student 70 reflected in her weekly reflections that emotionally, she should “have better control of my (her) emotion to display my (her) sense of professionalism and take better control of the situation”. In the interview, she expounded on this by saying: “I think the biggest learning for me right is that I over-think a lot, like II'm over-emotional. Yeah, cause, like, you know, keep thinking about negative stuff, like negative thoughts and all, like even during my daily life, sometimes I do think a bit like, I do overthink a lot, I do over-worry a lot. Yeah. But I think—I thought that I thought that nothing—like it won’t apply to my work. But I realized because of this right, I have been applying all these things into my work, and then I realize, eh, is II'm not actually…I'm not like…I realize it's just not good la. It's just not good for every aspect of my work. So that's why I decided to like put it aside. So I guess that's the biggest learning, like really just don't put too much emotions, like personal feelings into work ah. Don't have like—just like just let it flow and like yeah. Just don't put too much emotion”.

**Findings on Engagement in Trigger and Transformative Learning**

**Finding 5: Trigger events prompts engagement with trigger, especially in the presence of psychological safety**

The key finding is that task-related trigger events motivate students to ask questions to clarify about task requirements, ways of doing things and to seek information and advice. An enabling condition is psychological safety, where students feel that they won’t be judged for asking questions. As student 86 noted in her weekly reflections: “The director attentively listened to employees’ concerns without judgement and probed for more information. This encouraged employees to speak up more as they feel a genuine interest in their opinion and trust they will not be judged”. Student 15 also reflected that psychological safety at her workplace enabled her to overcome her embarrassment and ask questions to take advantage of the fact that she is there to learn as an intern: “So rather than being embarrassed and being embarrassed about asking questions, I rather take advantage that I’m there as an intern, and ask as many questions as possible”.

**Finding 6: A learning orientation and psychological strength such as resilience increases the likelihood that students ask questions, seek information and advice**

Another finding is that even in the absence of trigger events that may overwhelm, students who go into the internship with a learning orientation are more likely to ask questions and seek information and advice. As student 12 says : “I rather take advantage that I’m there as an intern, and ask as many questions as possible”. Student 98 who went into the internship with an explicit goal to learn as much as possible articulated in the interview: “For me at least, because given my position as an intern correct, I sort of became very, very shameless in terms of asking people for help and what not”.

**Finding 7: Social support and supportive supervisor facilitate the transformative learning process**

While individual learning orientations and exposure to triggers can prompt students to ask questions, seek advice and feedback, reflect more, leading to transformative learning, this process is facilitated by social support.

For instance, student 60 recounted that on the second day, she had a breakdown after work, and decided to catch up with a friend to listen to her internship experiences: “So when it was my time to share, I actually teared. I actually broke down. but I think my friends actually did help me. They told me it's like, I guess it's more of like a shift in perspective. Yeah. So, of course, as much as I can see this internship as I'm taking on much more responsibilities and roles than I'm supposed to. But I can also see as a learning opportunity”. As we can see from the quote, she experienced a shift in mindset because of how her friend reframed the internship as a learning opportunity for a full-time role that may be hard to come by.

Another example of how social support can make a difference is highlighted in the following quote from student 34: “There were a lot of other interns; we chat, we call it catch-ups, so we were essentially trying to make friends, trying to talk them. And I think, you know, cause Singaporeans we have that culture and we are very polite and nice, so we just try to small talk and try to get through the day la. So I would say the relationship is generally good, like we will help each other”.

Supportive supervisors and mentors at the internship also plays a critical role in the transformative learning of students. For instance, student 53 recounted: “You just take a bit of information, try to extract the positive sides of the situation, and then try to make it a learning experience. That’s just the long-to-short… yah. In fact, this is a thing that my mentor suggested to me as well. He said that, just do not focus so much on the negative side; just take it as a learning experience”.

## Discussion

Our qualitative study documents the processes under which students undergo transformative learning during their internships. We found that trigger events such as task, interpersonal and environmental challenges may prompt students to ask questions, seek advice and feedback, leading to transformative learning.

One key theme that stood out prominently was that students had to learn how to be more flexible and adaptable. To prepare better prepare students for internships, universities can provide students with more learning opportunities that target at developing their flexibility and adaptability skills.

When students approach the internship with a clear goal to learn, and frame the internship as an opportunity to learn rather than as a platform to demonstrate competence and performance, they tend to engage in more proactive behaviors such as asking questions, seeking clarifications, advice and feedback. These functional, pro-active behaviors should be encouraged to students prior to their internship and it may be beneficial for organizations to provide a safe space for students to practice such behaviors.

The theme of social support and its role in transformative learning in students also came out strongly. An implication of this is to provide students with a community of other interns and learning groups, so that they can support one another, reinforce positive learning mindsets in one another as they undergo mindset shifts and transformative learning.

## Conclusion

This piece of research is an exploratory study into the process of transformative learning during internships. Future research can focus on how students’ pre-existing mindsets, orientations and worldviews may impact the process and outcome of the transformative learning process.

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