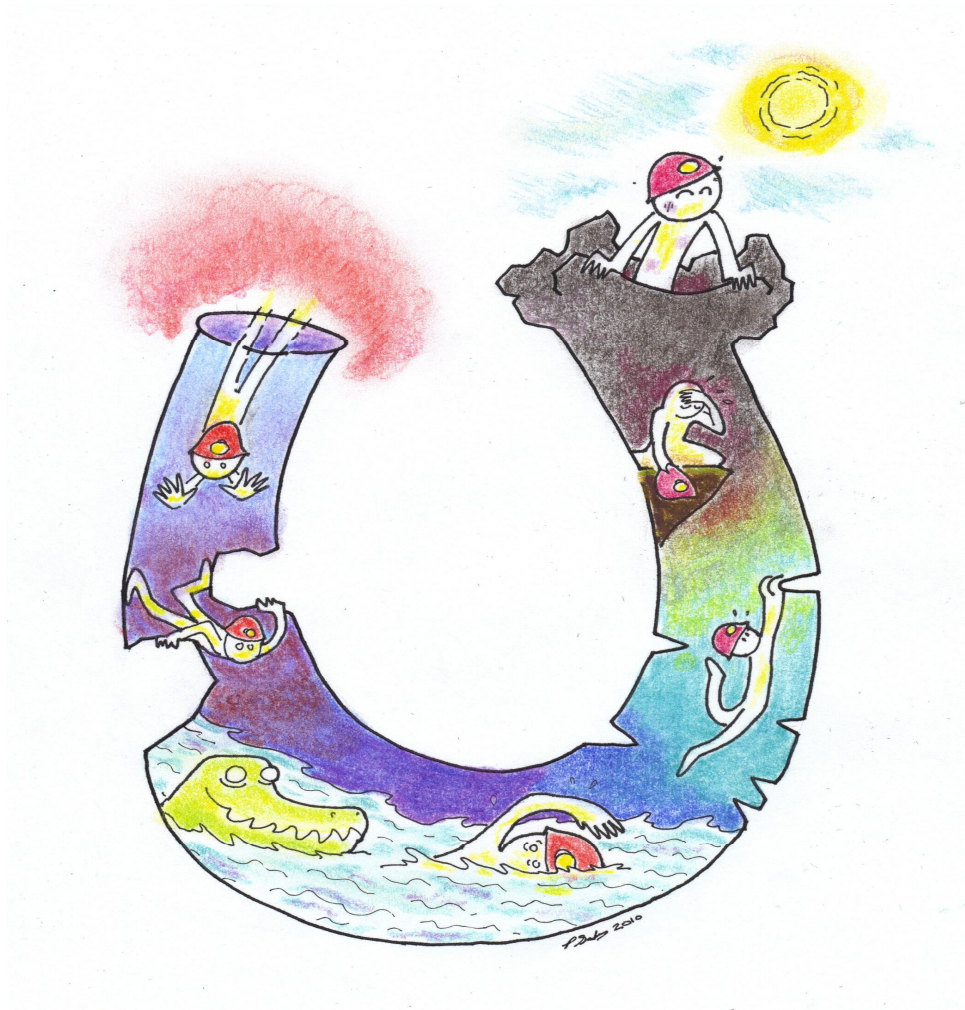


# Student Perspectives on Immersive Experiences

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## Introduction

The Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education is conducting a programme of research and idea development linked to the concept of life-wide learning: a holistic view of learning and learners engagement in learning that embraces the whole of a student's life while they are studying in higher education (Jackson 2008). One of the methods used to examine students' perspectives on the idea was to invite them to tell stories about their experiences.

In January 2008 students were invited to submit stories to a competition that was framed around the idea of 'immersion' – experiences which are intense and all consuming.

In the email invitation some prompts were given to provide guidance on the sort of things SCEPTRe was hoping to elicit from the stories, such as why it was immersive, what immersion meant to the student and what effect the experience had on the student. Whilst the stories were very diverse in nature, and covered a vast range of contexts and experiences, the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) identified very clear themes, all of which were present in almost all accounts. These themes inform on the nature of immersive experiences that students encounter, and give insight into what distinguishes a particular experience as immersive. This short account summarises the themes that appeared to be common across the stories. Individual stories can be accessed from the immersive experience wiki <http://immersiveexperience.pbworks.com/>.

What was surprising from the accounts was that, despite the huge variety in situations, the underlying themes, emotions, changes and experiences of the participants were very similar. This demonstrates the consistencies across immersive experiences and shows that there are key features that make an experience immersive. Some accounts involved very negative experiences that were forced upon the individuals, whereas others were positive challenges that participants elected to enter into. In many cases a new physical environment was entered, perhaps suggesting that this change in physical change can facilitate mental change. Also, many of the participants, although clearly helping or serving others, felt they were the primary beneficiary in the situation because of the huge benefit they got from the experience.

*"...this ultimately makes the trainee the primary beneficiary in this arrangement"*

The variety in the stories demonstrates the wide contexts that immersive experiences can occur in, and the time periods these experiences can prolong for. That is some lasted a short time, during a vacation, and for others it is over a period of years in the context of work of study.

Some were essentially solitary enterprises, such as choice of a PhD, or in illness of close family and friends. They are self-constructed and personal, with a chosen form of engagement or an enforced form of engagement. In these cases, however, there was still strong evidence of support and engagement of others, and also the presence of others going through the same or similar experiences simultaneously.

Some were work situations, with immersion as a co-created social enterprise. Also in these cases, some participants had elected to engage in this context, such as in a work placement, and in other cases the situation was created and enforced by external circumstances.

Many experiences are likely to contain a mix of these contexts, but in terms of Higher Education, the focus should be on co-created immersive experiences, and looking at ways to incorporate these, based on the features emerging below of an immersive experience, into the Higher Education experience.

## Summary of Themes

**Sense of journey** – beginning (excitement), middle (overwhelmed), end (mastery)

This sense of journey is the overall superordinate theme to emerge from the accounts. This journey is a feature in many of the themes and sub themes, as it appears this journey underpins transformation/change/learning, that is associated with immersive experience.

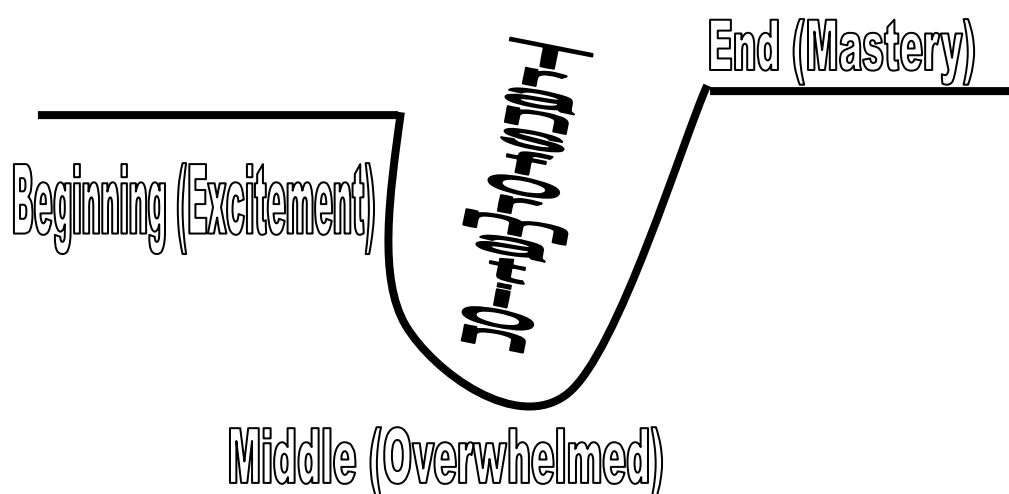
*“similar to the process in which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly”*

*“It is a transforming process”*

Most stories exhibited the initial part of the experience, often viewed with excitement and positive expectations, as distinct to the middle and the end. The middle displayed feelings of being overwhelmed and questioning the choices and experience and the end showed the individual as accepting and embracing the experience, having gained control. Individuals recognised that in the case of the experience continuing, it would continue to be immersive but they felt they had control and had learnt strategies to cope with the challenges of the experience.

Another feature of the stage-like process also involved how participants felt about the experience. In most cases, this staged process began with positive feelings, which then progressed to very negative feelings, and finally continued into the final stage where participants felt more deeply positive than initially, with a much greater understanding and appreciation of what was going on.

**Figure 1 Representation of the sense of journey through an immersive experience**



Another feature of the staged-process was that of coping and strategies. Most stories inferred that students felt they had the necessary knowledge, cognitive and affective skills at the beginning of the experience to cope with it. It is evident that this stage progressed to the next stage of students feeling they had 'hit a barrier', and did not have the necessary skills/knowledge or strategies to handle the situation (*"My intellect and understanding is shaken to timidness with all this strangeness"*). They had not appreciated how difficult or lonely it would be. This realisation forced the students to then change, adapt and acquire new strategies and knowledge in order to cope with their experience. This change pushed them into the final stage, which showed students with more developed strategies and awareness, taking them into the stage of mastery or enough experience and change to feel a sense of control.

*"So here I was now, suddenly able, having once been commanded by inability"*

**Emotions**– emotional suppression; fear, happiness

A strong subtheme that emerged from the stories was that of the role of emotions, and more specifically emotions serving the role of motivation. Many emotions were expressed, including fear, happiness, excitement, shame, unhappiness. What was apparent is during an immersive experience, very strong, almost overwhelming, emotions are experienced. These strong emotions, in many cases, compelled the participant to change or to re-evaluate, either to attain or maintain a positive emotion.

It is clear emotions play a very important and central role in an immersive experience, and it is this experience of strong emotions that leaves such an impact and makes the experience so valuable and memorable. It is apparent that any experience that elicits strong emotions, makes it very personal and can motivate the person to change. Therefore it can be inferred that experiences involving strong emotions leads to life-long change and therefore learning; emotions serve the role of changing a person.

Another interesting feature of some stories was that participants had to suppress emotions (*"On the other hand, you have to be calm and collected"*). In most cases this was necessary in order to maintain an external representation of oneself, and so as not to fall apart during the experience. This awareness of and ability to manage emotions seems important in an immersive experience, and this form of control, that is suppression, is perhaps the precursor to the participant gaining control over the situation as a whole. It is possible this first emotional suppression/control is the internal indication to the person they need to change in some way to cope with the situation, to 're-balance' the strong emotions, so the emotions become a signal and then a motivation for change.

*"What kept me persevering was my passion"*

*"I've never felt so proud of myself"*

*"The choice...came from a desire"*

*"I was surprised, but very happy about. This spurred me on to do different events"*

*"...a new level of responsibility. This responsibility motivated me to make the café as good as I can...I felt a high level of enjoyment"*

*"now the tears gushed forth from his eyes"*

*"every emotion"*

*"after months of emotional entanglement, I found myself so caught up"*

*"creating waves of emotion inside you".*

Emotions also emerged as a point of change, with participants becoming more expert in handling their emotions as a result of the experience.

*"could make myself more emotionally available"*

*"I've learnt to cry, to feel pain...it's essential to talk to people about them"*

## **Choice**

Choice emerged as a strong subtheme in all stories. In many cases this was choice to engage with the experience, but in all cases it was also a choice to remain in the situation and choice of what to do in order to cope with the situation. This choice really involves the will to do; that is the will to act in an immersive way. Many participants were aware of how challenging the situation could be, and in some cases this informed the choice to engage with it. However, it needs to be noted that in most cases, what people expected the challenges to be often turned out *not* to be the most difficult parts of the experiences. It is possible to assume therefore, that a certain type of person chooses to engage in immersive experiences, and that people have a choice of whether to remain in them and what to do with the experience (*"I must continue"; "I could have kept within my comfort zone of knowledge and ability but in broadening the remit the engagement became greater"*). This can be linked to the presentation of situational status, in terms of conceptions of being heroic, or the need to challenge oneself and, rather than fail, develop strategies to overcome difficulties.

*"I elected"*

*"I either had to tackle...or walk away..."*

*"But I was confident in my choice"*

*"I wanted to run, get out of her life because it hurt too much. I didn't want to face it anymore. But I stayed".*

*"There is a choice whether or not to tackle the wall and I guess the decision depends on how important it is to achieve the new level of expertise"*

## **Presentation of situational status** – justifies difficulties experienced/validation of self

Several stories related the environment they were entering into with reference to status, such as *'one of the leading'*, or *'sending its best and brightest into places where angels feared to tread'*. This is interpreted as the need to justify the difficulties experienced by that person as valid, showing the context or environment as exceptional. It could also be a need for the participant in order to understand why it was such a challenging experience and to validate them in terms of their ability, therefore ensuring it was the situation as opposed to the person leading to the difficulties experienced. This links to the above point of conceptions of being heroic, and demonstrates the type of person to immerse themselves in the type of person that chooses, or has the will, to enter or remain in a situation they recognise will be challenging.

## **Balance/Inbalance**

Balance was a feature of many of the stories. Many participants experienced great inbalance in terms of their immersive context and other facets of their lives. Most said whilst they were immersed other areas of their life were ignored, and they did not reach understanding and control until they had reinstated a more balanced lifestyle. It would seem that any immersive situation will entail a period of the situation becoming all-consuming, but it is important for this not to be sustained for the learning to occur. This is another expression of journey in immersive experiences. The person involved needs to journey from balance to inbalance, but to recognise the learning must continue until balance is regained. The motivation to regain balance drives the person to change or learn.

*"Other parts of my life went neglected"*

*"sealed off from the outside world...re-emerges with a new awareness, bringing an additional layer of colour to their world view"*

*"But saturation...can lead to imbalances in life"*

## **Support from others** – often strangers become supporters

A central subtheme across all accounts was the role of others as offering support, guidance and in many cases a feeling that without others the participant would not have survived the experience. In some cases this was indirect support, where participants observed others,

and were humbled, inspired or admired the resilience of others which led the participant to be determined to change in order to cope with the experience.

*"My Uncle and Aunt were pillars of strength too. The strength, help and support I received from my family, my amazing family, was invaluable".*

*"I was blown back by his positive attitude. It gave me strength."*

In other cases the supportive role of others was much more direct and explicit. Also, in many cases participants only gained objectivity and reflection, or new strategies, from engaging with other people, so support is emotional but also leads to change.

It can be assumed that the role of other people in facilitating support, reflection and change in an individual immersed in an experience is incredibly important in the individual learning from the experience.

*"She also told me that when something's wrong, you should put your energy into changing it, rather than letting it get you down"*

*"...and found myself greeted by a mentor"*

*"The only silver lining in these clouds of ambiguity was his Assistant"*

*"his perspective on life left me hungry"*

*"Mr Hawkes' question...triggered off a change in me...the mere fact that Mr.Hawkes was willing to teach it to me was enough encouragement...it showed he believed I was capable"*

*"...Laura also taught me the most important things I will ever learn about life. Laura was 9 years old."*

*"I was able to evaluate and integrate different teachers styles to form a style of my very own"*

## **Comparison**

Comparison emerged as a theme with various subthemes.

### *To Others*

A feature of many stories demonstrated the participants' need to compare themselves to others. This was occasionally in a judgemental way, but in many instances this was in terms of self-deprecation.

*"Who all seemed to be taking it in their stride"*

*"They would talk about their good relationships with their host families, and I envied them."*

*"Bianca was lovely...highlighted our differences."*

In other instances, comparing themselves to how others in similar situations were coping motivated the participants to change or to persevere with the experience. This links strongly to the theme of support from others, in terms of this comparison leading to motivation to act or change demonstrates how other people were indirectly supportive, without knowing the impact they had.

*"It was seeing the people around me that understood these things, who seemed much the same as me, that gave me hope"*

*"Observations I made...in which different teachers taught...left me with an extremely rich perspective".*

### *To Familiar*

Another subtheme of comparison that arose was the need for participants to compare the unfamiliar to the familiar. (All stories described experiences that were unfamiliar in some way and to varying degrees. It seems an immersive experience has to contain unfamiliar features that need new learning or acceptance). Participants were compelled to compare unfamiliar things, for example behaviours, customs, cultures, feelings etc, to familiar ones. It seems this comparison is necessary for someone undergoing an immersive experience, in part to help understand it, but I think more strongly in order to try to ground oneself and regain control by focussing on something familiar or trying to contextualise the unfamiliar into the familiar.

This can also be viewed in terms, again, of an expression of journey; from the familiar, to the unfamiliar, then using comparisons coming to terms with the unfamiliar until it becomes more natural.

*"I could not help but compare the quality and the cost to English public transport"*

*"She had to learn to accept the differences between what she was working on now...and everything that had come before"*

*"After that, I thought, I'll never worry about a work or university presentation again"*

*"The experience made me appreciate how good my home country of Ireland is"*

*"I wanted things to be the way they were"*

### **Loss of identity/role change**

Many participants' accounts gave rise to a feeling of loss of identity and role change. This was sometimes very apparent through use of a uniform (*"where I changed into more suitable garb"*) or becoming a minority group, but also in terms of questioning oneself and beliefs, or through language barriers and going from a position of 'expert' to 'novice'.

*"My identity as a student was no longer prominent in defining my contribution. I was an individual working in firm"*

*"My poor Spanish was constantly a barrier between what I was, and what I wanted to be"*

It can be assumed that this loss of identity is a feature of immersion, as it leads to the overwhelming feelings and the strong emotions. Through this loss of identity or role change, a different identity emerges. This new identity forces learning and change, and the recognition of this identity is part of the feeling of transformation. Here is seen another journey, resulting in integration of the old roles and new roles into a more rounded person or identity.

*"returning to a world where I am surrounded by the paradox of everything yet nothing being the same"*

*"It would be for personal reasons, for self identification"*

*"While I was the mental health professional with little experience, they were all experts by experience...I also learned to position myself not as the expert, but as a facilitator"*

### **Perspective change**

A strong feature of all stories was the perspective changes that occurred, often driven by the strong emotions.

*"I loved this piece and mastering one bar gave me so much satisfaction. I was keen and patient...always imagining the finishing result to block out the temptation of giving up when obstacles appeared"*

In order to counteract the negative and to remove dissonance, participants changed perspective or re-evaluated the outlook of the situation.

*"Despite the basic facilities, I came to like the Nile Beach Camp...Ignoring the stained concrete floor...I looked forward to my cold showers morning and evening"*

This in some instances, also worked to re-frame things in a more negative perspective.

*"When at home...he enjoyed rains...this time he perceived rains to be something afflictive, distressing and calamitous"*

*"somehow everyday existence replaced excitement"*

This cognitive reappraisal or perspective change often gave rise to the changes in the person and the learning. It is these perspective changes that allow the person to develop richer understanding and greater cognitive strategies as a result of an immersive experience. Often this cognitive reappraisal also took the form of the focus away from what they didn't know/couldn't do, to what they had accomplished and achieved.

*"So it is, I thought, and then I started to reconsider my strategy"*

*"I realised I had been focussing purely on what was left to do, rather than taking stock of what I had been able to accomplish"*

*"The immersion I had been through changed my perception...it is not something to shy away from for fear of being overwhelmed"*

*“fresh perspectives being considered”*

*“Or to put a more positive spin on it, a year of extreme challenges and opportunities”*

*“Learning that the Xhosa of South Africa train people who hear voices to become healers suggested there could be positive explanations and responses to experiences that seem so far removed from Westernised medical conceptualisations”*

*‘She also told me that when something’s wrong, you should put your energy into changing it, rather than letting it get you down’*

**Paradox** – creates dissonance, and therefore a need to change

Paradox was another superordinate theme to emerge in the analysis. Some of the paradoxes are listed below, but the most notable thing to infer is that these paradoxes to arise from immersive experiences creates dissonance, and therefore change and learning within the individual occurs in order to reduce this dissonance.

### **External vs Internal Presentation**

Many participants expressed the pressure they felt between having to present themselves positively externally whilst internally feeling negative about themselves or the situation. This also links with how participants perceived themselves internally, and through the experience had to perceive themselves differently, as those externally saw them.

*“feigning control till I believed it also”*

*“And suddenly I am not a short man but tall...my accent isn’t refined it’s awkward”*

*“and I didn’t tell them because I felt guilty that I wasn’t relishing every moment”*

### **Small difference vs big challenge**

Many participants, after re-evaluation and reflection, displayed the focus shift from making a big difference that was impossible due to the barriers, to a focus on making a small difference or working effectively in a small area. This shift in focus allows participants to gain control over the immersion and sustain themselves through the rest of the experience.

*“I needed to stop worrying about what I was supposed to be doing, and just try to put as much of myself into what I was doing”*

*“you don’t have to go thousands of miles away to make a difference”*

### **Expected/unexpected**

Many accounts showed the difference in what people expected compared to what the realities were.

*“He did not expect such grim and unpleasant news”*

*“These concerns proved to be unfounded”*

*“To want something so much and to then realise that is nothing like you expected was painfully difficult”*

This extended to the learning, the high points or the challenges, which were very unexpected. Participants often found the most valuable parts of the experience to be the parts they had not even considered previously, which participants became aware of through reflection. This displays that a nature of immersion is that the nature of the experience can only be fully fathomed following the experience.

*“I was not ready for...”*

*“But looking back now, the most valuable things I learned were those I had not expected to”*

*“I discovered that I held assumptions I had not been conscious of”*

### **Positive vs negative**

A sub-theme emerged of the positive compared to the negative. Parts of the experiences were either described very positively or very negatively, and this polarisation is perhaps a necessary feature of an immersive experience. This strong feeling of extremes makes the experience memorable and probably is another drive for learning to occur. There was also paradox between positive and negative emotions emerging in many of the stories.



*“Awash with excitement and fear”*

*“although I let the excitement and pride of the future achievement fill me in, a certain anxiety kept bugging me”*

*“I’ve never had so many consecutive emotional highs and lows”*

### **Academic vs ‘real world’**

Several participants, through the immersive experience, became aware of the tension between academic, book/classroom based learning and practice-based learning. This seemed to begin as a tension in the stories, but then developed into a combining of the two, reducing the tension and improving the person’s coping abilities. All stories acknowledged that the learning that occurred because of the experience was life-long learning, that was transferable to other, unrelated situations, but that also combined things that had been previously learnt. This demonstrates the nature of learning for life and the sort of experiences that can give rise to this type of learning.

*“a skill academic research could not have aided me in...the interaction between my practical learning and my theoretical knowledge of psychology began to occur”*

*“his suggestions were more of a bookish nature, he thought. He felt that the proffers they came up with were more practical”*

*“He now practically knew that theory and practice were two separate entities, but not detached from each other”.*

### **Contextual awareness**

Many of the experiences demonstrated the participants achieving greater contextual awareness and comparing what they experienced to the wider context. In some instances this was in relation to the environment or culture and why it had arisen (such as history) (*“Perhaps it’s the deep-seated reverence for samurai culture...or some sense of alienation after the World Wars...Whatever the social fuel...”*). For others this was the contextual awareness of their emotions, their learning or their ability to transfer skills. (*“I have most certainly adapted it to many different aspects of life”; “Learning to learn from them was crucial...I hope will serve me well throughout my career”*)

**Change** – leave behind, take on new, integrate: *“There were a number of changes”*

All experiences saw changes in the participants. These changes were driven by a necessity in order to survive the situation. This change is an essential outcome of an immersive experience it would seem, and is part of what makes something immersive.

*“I found myself etching my path in a skewed manner, still heading in the same direction, yet at a different angle entirely”.*

In many instances there was a feeling of uncertainty about how to integrate the ‘new person’ back into an old situation. Here are some of the features of the change theme:

- Adjustment/accluturation/institutionalised/indoctrinated
- Creativity
- Reflection, often with others allowing space for objectivity – *“depth of patience and self-reflection that I’d never really exercised before”*
- Learning – new strategies driven by need to learn
- Need to Survive – *“do or die mentality”; “protective function had overridden my mind”*
- Seek information

### **Failure/embarrassment/humiliation**

*“But he had to speak, so he started with whatever expressions came to him first”*

*“...sometimes feeling there was no way we were going to stay afloat. But capsize we could not”.*

The change and learning appears to be driven by creativity also; participants feeling as though they do not have the skills or knowledge, have to be creative in the way they handle the situation, struggle through it, devise strategies to succeed in that situation and ultimately emerge out of the other side. This demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of human nature.

*"My creativity began to exert itself"*

*"I came to the decision that in turn for me evaluations of the students, I would ask the students to evaluate my performance...I received performance recommendations and more. The students appeared genuinely appreciative of the reciprocal offer.it created a wonderfully positive atmosphere"*

### **Self-belief/self-reliance**

The subtheme of self-belief emerged, which in most instances began as a lack of self-belief, developing, often by support from others and reflection, into a recognition of one's ability. This demonstrates that immersive experiences can lead to independence and confidence, and again shows the sense of journey in the transformation process of an immersive experience.

*"The uncertainty of ever getting through it has been replaced with determination and a trust in my ability"*

*"...no longer held back by the thought that my lack of work experience...would detract from my ability to make worthwhile contributions"*

*"You just trust that you will manage, that you will succeed, that you will achieve...in confidence"*

*"this gave me the confidence"*

*"I started feeling confident and comfortable in the classroom"*

### **Loneliness**

Most participants felt lonely at some stage of the experience.

*"He felt himself cut off from the world"*

*"I was often lonely"*

*"Life felt transient, monotonous, lonely"*

### **Discussion**

As the above themes demonstrate, immersive experience generates a rich and highly complex response in a human being. The consistency of features to emerge across accounts, despite their variety, indicate what makes an experience immersive as opposed to simply another experience. It is clear that an immersive experience is incredibly challenging, and often the discomfort is what drives the person to change or learn, leading to the emergence of a richer person with new perspectives and understanding. Immersive experiences, it would appear, are incredibly rich as learning experiences, and the learning that occurs is life-long learning; that can be applied to a plethora of situations and contexts, rather than the learning being context-specific.

Words such as *"subsuming"*, *"overwhelming"*, *"drowning not swimming"* from the accounts resonate with the original meaning of immersion: that is the emotional and physical experience of being submerged in water. This complete immersion in an experience leads to the huge effect and change it appears to bring about in those going through such an experience.



Overall, the themes and subthemes demonstrate the transformation a person undergoes during an immersive experience. Often the person has chosen to enter this situation, or at least elects to remain in it, to survive it and transform. This evidence of will and choice suggests it is a certain type of person that is open to immersive experience and this is also something to consider if aiming to incorporate this type of learning into higher education.

All the accounts show the participants emerge from this journey of transformation as richer, more rounded individuals, all recognising the impact the experience had not only on them at that particular moment in time, but how the experience will impact on the rest of their lives.

## **Reflective Note**

I found this analysis of students very personal stories an immersive experience in itself and I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to read these accounts. The richness, personal nature and emotions evident in the accounts made this an incredibly immersive experience for me, and the volume and depth of the data meant I had to submerge myself in it. Reading these accounts, some of which I have had very similar experiences to, made me think differently about things that have happened to me, or helped me to reflect on events I had not previously realised as giving me so much learning. It was interesting to read similar situations to things I have experienced and compare differences and similarities to how I experienced those events. I found the process exhausting and uncomfortable at times, as it forced me to think about myself and some accounts were personalised to me. Through this process of analysis I have reflected on various things and experiences I have had, and have learnt things and developed new perspectives. At times I found it very difficult to continue and had to step back from it for a while, and then return at another time. It has been an incredibly valuable process for me and one I have really enjoyed.

## **Reference**

Jackson, N. J. (2008) A Life-Wide Curriculum: Enriching a traditional WIL scheme through new approaches to experience-based learning. Proceedings of the WACE Symposium Sydney 2008. on-line at [http://www.acen.edu.au/images/resources/conferences/wace\\_conference\\_08/e-proceedings.pdf](http://www.acen.edu.au/images/resources/conferences/wace_conference_08/e-proceedings.pdf)

## **Immersive Experience Wiki**

<http://immersiveexperience.pbworks.com/>