

Think Tank: Professional Development

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Mezirow Moments: The Value of Conferences for a Mother Returning to Study

It's not easy to change career paths, but it is something that teachers often consider after working in one field for many years. This can mean a return to study, but as Adult Education experts have noted, older learners usually face some [specific barriers](#) in returning to school that younger learners do not, and sometimes these barriers prevent them from trying. And if you are a mother, like I am, even going to a conference can be difficult. This is my story of the challenges I faced in returning to study, and of the people who helped me to overcome them. I hope it's an encouragement to you if you're facing similar challenges.

Almost two years ago, I was on a plane trip to a language teaching conference in Adelaide, Australia. It took a lot of organising to get me on that plane, as it does for any mother who is preparing to leave her family for a few days: washing clothes, cooking extra meals, rearranging kids' schedules, and coordinating babysitting so that I could free my time to get to the conference. But the biggest challenge to getting on the plane was the niggling voice of self-doubt in my mind: "Who am I kidding? I've been changing nappies and finding playdough recipes for the last 10 years, why



am I even pretending to study TESOL, let alone show up at a conference for TESOLers?" The domestic and emotional challenges I was facing made me hesitant to even go to the conference. If it weren't for my husband encouraging me to go, I probably would have stayed at home. If you have a partner who's facing the challenge of returning to study, don't underestimate the impact of your support and encouragement. It might be the very thing that encourages them to take the next step, or to persevere on their study journey, when it would be easier to give up. That certainly has been the case for me, as a mother of four who has retrained in TESOL after 20 years as a music and German teacher in

schools.

To be honest, I struggle with the self-confidence needed to count myself as valid in the TESOL field. I don't have the TESOL street cred that I perceive others as having, since I don't have experiences of teaching overseas or in English language schools to

add weight to my TESOL expertise. However, in spite of all my doubts, I went to that conference in Adelaide. I learned a lot and grew personally and professionally as a result. The conversations I had and the connections I formed with other teachers there changed the way I viewed myself. For example, I had the opportunity to talk with one of the keynote speakers at the conference, the wonderful [Phan Le Ha](#) from the University of Hawaii (2nd from right). She encouraged me, and reminded me that teaching and learning was more than the sum of the university subjects I'd completed or the curriculum content I was delivering.

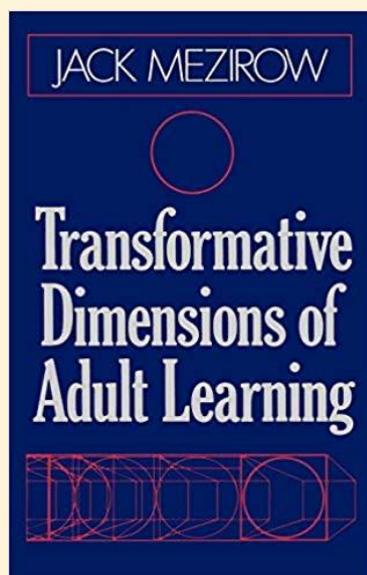


My proficiency as an English language teacher didn't depend on how many language schools I had taught ESL in. What I bring to TESOL is enhanced by everything I bring with me to the classroom: *my past is an asset to my current teaching practice.*

Before that conversation, I'd thought that all my years away from study were a liability to me as an ESL teacher. Now I could see they were an asset! Le Ha's observation was that, just as my current practice is enhanced by my previous teaching skills and experiences in a new context, so it is for my students. Their English learning journeys are enhanced by the cultural and linguistic skills and the experiences that they bring with them to the ESL classroom (Phan, 2008). This underpins the concept of translanguaging, which was a concept I'd learned very little about before I went to that conference. (You can read a great article about translanguaging by Michelle Ocriciano in our [September 2019 Think Tank.](#))



[The Adelaide conference I went to](#) is also one of the reasons the Think Tank editorial team has an Australian teacher on it. There was a presenter at the conference who spoke about stories. It was so engaging that every teacher I spoke to after the conference remembered him and his presentation. It was Curtis Kelly, and he talked with me during a break at the conference. He asked if I'd be interested in writing an article on music and language teaching for his "Think Tank" bulletin in Japan. I said yes, but then I looked at the paper he was holding. Mind, Brain, and Education? Self-doubt crept in again, in the exact same words: "Who am I kidding? I've been changing nappies and finding playdough recipes for the last 10 years, what do I know about the brain?" ...



And so the learning journey continues. Returning to formalised study later in life is hard enough, but being a mother as well adds even more difficulty to the challenge. However, the rewards are rich and I have more of an appreciation for the opportunity to learn now than I did when I was a young undergraduate student. If I start to feel like I'm alone on the journey, I remind myself of Jack Mezirow's theory of [transformative learning](#). Mezirow studied the journeys of older women returning to education. His ideas became a source of inspiration and comfort to me during my studies, especially as I learned more about working with students from refugee backgrounds. (You can read more about my experiences in some of our [Think Tanks from 2018 and 2019](#).) For me, everything I discovered in my studies and the classroom was changing my "frames of reference" (DeCapua, Marshall, & Frydland, 2018, p. 19). As I began to learn what the incredibly diverse students in my classes had to teach me, I felt like I was going through Mezirow's "disorienting dilemma" (DeCapua, Marshall & Frydland, 2018, p.19). All my beliefs about teaching and learning were starting to change, and I was changing as a result. [Nan Frydland](#), one of the authors of the article I just cited, is an older woman who returned to study TESOL later in life. Reading about her experiences helped me to understand my own learning journey. She described going

back to university as a transformational process that helped her become not only a better teacher, but a better human being.

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Conferences are expensive, and they are not always easy to get to. Mothers like me are busy, and finding the time to learn something new is a challenge. But if you can get to it, the opportunities you'll have and the

connections you'll make at the next conference will change your perspective about teaching and learning. In spite of the obstacles, getting to a conference (online or in person) could provide you with some valuable Mezirow moments.

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A short [video](#) and an [article](#) on how the brain reacts to Coronavirus



Psychologist David DeSteno



Neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky