

Transforming and being transformed – an eclectic learning journey

Johanna Tomczak, PhD Student, School of Psychology, University of Leeds, UK
psjto@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

Transformation could be translated as ‘to undergo a change of form’. In this work, I will reflect on transformation during my PhD on several levels, from my personal learning journey (what has changed me and what have I changed since the beginning of my PhD) to changes in the way I do research (to move from lab-based testing to online experiments). As transformation often is an implicit process, we do not notice how far we have come and that we have achieved goals, which was only possible thanks to our adaptation to a new situation. In this reflection, I will focus on looking back at my own experience and hope to encourage others to think of, and reflect on, their own transformation.

Main Text

In this piece, I will reflect on my transformation as a second-year PhD student in Cognitive Neuroscience, both on personal and professional levels. During my first few weeks as a PhD student I felt like an explorer without a compass – I had no idea in which direction to go. Without even knowing how to structure my days, I tried to figure out what doing a PhD actually meant. How do you DO a PhD? Where do you start? Coming directly from a French undergraduate degree (Maths, Computer Science and Cognitive Science) and a very guided and exam-based approach to Higher Education, adapting to my new freedom and responsibilities as a PhD student in Psychology at the University of Leeds was a big challenge.

As an undergraduate student, I was used to having classes to attend and assignments to hand in, and even if I knew that the daily life of a PhD student would look somewhat different, changing into new working habits took me quite a while. What should I do today? And most importantly, how much time would I allow myself to spend on a particular task? It was only about a year into my PhD that I realized the transformation I had gone through, without even noticing it. Looking back now at what I did about a year ago, I am able to see how much I have learnt so far and how many new skills I have acquired, from being able to visualize data in R to designing experiments online. To answer these questions, I now have a very good feeling about tasks I want to achieve at a given day. Sometimes, a To-Do-List helps me to organize myself, sometimes it is knowing about an approaching deadline, but most of the time it is reminding myself of my final goal and breaking a generic Gantt-chart into little chunks of tasks towards the completion of my PhD.

I remember a big milestone during the first year of my PhD, in January 2020: the first conference I ever attended in my life. Even if I only went as a listener, I felt very grateful for being part of the scientific community and discovering all the fascinating, most recent research in Cognitive Psychology. This was the only conference I experienced ‘live’ and not

online, and looking back at it now, it really transformed me. It was after the conference, on my train journey home, that I finally gave up thinking of myself as a student (which, unfortunately, the term 'PhD student' implies), but more as a researcher. At that moment, I felt like being part of a bigger network of researchers and even wrote down names of people I wanted to remember to look up their work. Maybe it was just a paradigm shift in my own mind, but it made me realize that I now belong to a community of researchers and that my work contributes to what we currently know in Cognitive Neuroscience. Half a year later, I presented a poster at the same event and just had my first oral presentation at the same conference this summer. From listening to presenting, I have become more and more confident in my abilities, and my doubts of having all it needs to complete a PhD make themselves heard only occasionally.

But *transformation* did not only happen to myself as a person, it also took place in my research journey. During the first few months of my PhD, pre-COVID, I would never have imagined conducting studies online or that this would be even an option in my field. But it was and here again, these changes made me rethink the whole research process. While starting to plan my first, bigger study in March/April 2020, my supervisors suggested that I create the experiment in an online platform, so that data collection could be done at a distance. The study was measuring reaction times to visual stimuli and my biggest concerns were that I could not observe participants while they would concentrate on my experiment and ensure quality of the data collected. These were valid concerns, but when I had a look at the data and compared them to the ones of a similar lab-based study, I only observed slightly slower reaction times, but nothing too serious for the effects I was interested in. Not seeing my participants took away some valuable insights I would probably have gained by talking to them about my research, but it also meant less time spent on data collection, as several people could take part in my study at the same time. This clearly seems to be a major advantage of online research, as behavioural data can be collected in a matter of days, allowing researchers for example to concentrate on faster dissemination of results. Finally, by doing my research online, I was able to adapt to the new circumstances and to become more creative in making the experiments engaging. As I was aware that my participants would be at a distance, and probably with their phones or flatmates around, I made sure to keep distraction at a minimum. This meant several attention checks in my experiment to ensure participants were still concentrated and regular breaks for them, where they could decide when to continue the study. Once they had completed everything, they were also able to provide feedback, so that I could learn from their experience. In fact, I am already planning my next experiment online and have taken into account recent feedback, from font size and clear instructions to the order of screening material.

Finally, I transformed in the way I think of, and use, my own languages. As a matter of fact, the main topic I am studying in my research is bilingualism and its impact on brain and mind. Unsurprisingly, as for most researchers in this scientific area, my interest stems from a personal context: as a German native speaker, I discovered my passion for languages early in life, and now use three languages on a regular basis. While during my degree in France I felt almost like 'losing' my German and not having enough time to practise my English, I recently noticed that I had reached a balance between these three languages. While English remains the

language of my research work and soon enough it will be the one of my written thesis, I use German and French to communicate with friends and family, to read and to watch films. This third and more personal transformation is one I am proud of, as too much perfectionism in speaking my second and third language almost made me forget how great it is to have three mental lexicons available, to actively feel and sense in three different languages. While I believe that I am not exactly the same person, depending on which language I speak and think in, I am grateful for those moments where, suddenly, languages mix and a completely new word comes out of my mouth, being half French, half English, but with a German pronunciation. Often not understood in its complexity by either native, monolingual speaker, it shows that languages influence and enrich each other and the person speaking them.

In conclusion, I deeply believe that transformation is what makes us learn and improve ourselves, whether it comes from inside of us or is caused by our environment. I would go even further and say that in order to successfully complete a PhD, we all have to undergo transformation, personally and professionally.