‘In hospital I’m treated as if I’m still sick... but in college, I’m treated as normal’; transformative learning for adults with mental health problems.

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Adults with mental health problems have been found to be underrepresented in fulltime employment and education, and are more likely to be socially and economically disadvantaged. Additionally, in the field of education there is little research involving people with moderate to severe mental health problems about their learning experiences in non-clinical settings. In light of this, an interpretive narrative study was carried out involving 15 students in a Further Education college. Specifically, the students were asked during extensive one-to-one interviews, about their recent experiences of classroom learning and their narratives were analysed in relation to well-being and transformative learning theory. Students reported numerous benefits arising from their learning which for some, included experiencing transformative changes in their thinking and sense of self, particularly in relation to feeling ‘more normal’.

However, the narratives also revealed that unless certain wider societal factors were sufficiently addressed, the potential for these benefits to be fully realised, was severely hindered. Additionally the narratives revealed that although good teaching and learning was important, unless the students received targeted help from the Mental Health Advisers, who worked between the hospital and the college, they were unable to maximise the educational opportunities offered at college. The study concluded that when such support is given, classroom learning has the potential to positively influence the sense of well-being for adults with mental health problems and possibly lead them onto a pathway, towards a different future.