

AN MPP JOURNEY OF INSPIRATION, PERSPIRATION AND APPLICATION

Alan Dowman, James Harrison and Behnam Soltani

INTRODUCTION

This case study arises from a reflective interview to discuss a Master of Professional Practice (MPP) journey with three participants; Alan Dowman, an MPP student, his academic mentor, James Harrison and a research observer, Dr Behnam Soltani, who specialises in situated learning and social learning practices.

The Master of Professional Practice offered by Otago Polytechnic provides a student with a process based learning approach that assists their development in their field of professional practice with learning being derived from an action based research project. Each student can be supported by up to three people; a facilitator who monitors the overall journey of the student and provides generic and pastoral support; an academic mentor who provides specific academic advice concerning the structure and ethics of the research approach and an industrial or work based mentor, who is familiar with the project work within an organisation or industry sector and can facilitate the process within this context.

The following description captures some perspectives of this multiple experience together with a reflective session shared between the student and his academic mentor which was observed and commented on by Dr Soltani..

ALAN DOWMAN, THE STUDENT

OUTLINE OF MY MPP JOURNEY

My Masters journey began in 2015 with my desire to achieve a significant academic qualification, coupled with the aspiration to crystallise and codify my key learnings, insights and historical processes of product development into a practical, logical Inno-ventive system which could reduce the innovation development timeframe from 18 months to 3 months, and increase the probability of success.

My personal motivation to earn a Master's was to balance my work history, including my practical business experience, tacit knowledge and innovation successes, with a formal recognised qualification.

By taking my historic automotive engineering trade qualifications and my international commercial experience into consideration, the Capable NZ programme provided me with the platform to achieve my Masters of Professional Practice, with Distinction. I chose the specialist area of International Business, with a key focus on innovative new product development.

BACKGROUND

My 25 plus year career has been based around complex problem solving and evolving ideas in business which has created a number of new commercial opportunities, and many exciting new jobs and careers for enterprising young students and professionals.

All through my career I have achieved significant success in the development and commercialisation of innovative products and services, and led both start-ups and established business units. Two of these achieved sales revenue of over 30 million dollars each, within 5 year timeframes.

During my career, I have evolved into a practical, effective enabler; a business team builder and innovation leader. I became a specialist in bringing disciplined, yet simple and effective processes into complex projects, and honed skills based on strategic positioning of products for the highest probability of success.

MY MASTER OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE PROJECT

My two key strategic goals for my MPP work based learning project were to:

- Take my historical somewhat disjointed processes, my latest insights, and create a new effective product development system, which I branded: the Inno-ventive FTRP Methodologies © (fast track rapid progress).
- Develop a practical system to guide a new entrepreneur; or an experienced practitioner; to create, develop, rapidly prototype, and prepare a product or service for international launch in the current rapidly evolving, dynamic and competitive market.

My initial perspective was that I would create an accelerated process in a traditional market, however an early discovery during the first stages of the project was the final methodology would actually be an accelerated process in a new market environment.

This new market is co-created with the new product. It was an emergent process throughout my MPP, and I did have to work very hard to stay grounded in the absolute reality of the priorities of today, and the future.

Many governing factors were included in my assessment analysis, including the exponential rate of technology change and the effects of having (for the first time in history) four generations in the active workforce. I established the need for a universal language in process methodologies to be the interpreter for these different minds and communication types.

During the MPP, I became very pro-active at reviewing my own original process and priority hypothesis. I was able to constructively and deliberately delve deeper; reflect and synthesise, and then repeat the exercise over a period of many months. The clarity gained at these times added significantly to the Inno-ventive methodologies which assisted me to 'make the complex simple' and be more effective.

When I approached my peers to review portions of my project, I was humbled when the feedback was so positive. As a result of one of these meetings, I was asked to be guest speaker at a regional development innovation skills workshop for young entrepreneurs and business start-ups.

Other innovation centred speaking, workshop and seminar opportunities were also presented to me. Its great fun to speak about what you love, with people who need it, and who are keen to learn.

PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Historically I always felt I was too busy to do a Masters degree. I always have done short courses whenever possible on relevant subjects. However, when I commenced the Capable NZ programme, I found everything I targeted to study could be directly applied to the business, projects and situations I was directly involved in. At times, it was a case of learn in the afternoon, reflect on application, and apply it the next morning.

During my MPP journey, I discovered immense value in the reflection phases. When my academic mentor, James challenged why and how I had come to a particular philosophy or direction, I was forced to go back and review the processes I was carrying out naturally and automatically.

This personal review was a difficult process. It was during the reflection stage of this when I realised I had operated on an urgent output result paradigm for most of my early career. This meant that I would seek broad options for a problem, adapt it to be fit for purpose, then implement it, and get on to the next problem.

This is one way of achieving traction in a project or emerging business. However, James forced me to review the fundamental reasons of why I had to operate like that. The result of operating in this manner is you create a series of independent silos of information, which was compounded as I had operated across a range of highly technical and specialised industries.

As a result of identifying what had occurred to create these independent silos of information, it allowed me to reflect in each silo area, synthesise the key insights into the essence of what could then be applied to a vast range of industries. This allowed a greater clarity of thought and perspective.

As I moved through this phase, I found that I overcame the creative tension holding me to an advanced operational level mindset and I moved to a strategic level focus. This was a significant moment in my MPP project, and in my own professional development.

The Capable NZ programme and its talented personnel enabled me to achieve these two key life goals. In particular Glenys Ker for her insightful decision to assign James Harrison as my academic mentor. James's direct experience in commercial business, coupled with his academic expertise allowed us to develop a constructive, effective working relationship very quickly.

True growth of an individual can only occur when there is an amount of challenge and reward. James had the commercial and academic experience and expertise to force me, and guide me, to go well beyond my comfort zone and forced me to address the key areas that I didn't know could be applied. One reward is the fresh perspective and ability to view new contexts quickly.

In summary, I have found the Capable NZ Master of Professional Practice programme to be challenging, extremely rewarding and beneficial in all aspects of professional life, and in many aspects of my personal life. There is now a greater degree of sustainability in all areas of my business processes, and in my personal sustainability focus. These have become very value based, with a focus on the long term rather than the short or immediate term. Cause and effect are now explored to a greater level of depth and in a broader sense than I would have carried out prior to the research component of my MPP journey.

One new area of insight is how the Inno-ventive FTRP Methodologies can be applied in many different industries and sectors. Education is one sector that I did not consider during the development, however there are now many opportunities emerging in this area.

In 2016, I formed a new business (www.inno-ventive.com) based on the Inno-ventive FTRP Methodologies and my new value based sustainability model. The exciting new areas of application within tertiary education are being

actively investigated, as well as the continuing focus on commercial business, entrepreneurs, innovation teams, senior executive and company directors development.

My personal strategic goal is to continue my personal and professional development and learning in the form of a Doctorate of Professional Practice (DPP) with Capable NZ.

JAMES HARRISON, THE ACADEMIC MENTOR

CONTEXT

The purpose of this section is to identify that the MPP academic mentor is also on a learning journey with their student and how the interactions between them challenged and enhanced the interactions within a shared learning space in a manner that was initially identified by Lave and Wenger (1991).

I joined Capable NZ as a facilitator and academic mentor in mid 2015 and Alan was an early Master of Professional Practice student I was assigned responsibility for. What I brought to this role, which is true of most of the Capable academic staff, was significant life and career experience in other domains. In my case, this ranged over five careers spanning 50 years comprising research engineering, human resource development and leadership in a large UK high technology company, project leadership of national vocational and qualification projects in the UK civil service, consulting leadership in organisational change and qualification projects in NZ and senior academic leadership roles in the NZ tertiary education sector.

STUDENT ALIGNMENT

A significant part of the success of the Master of Professional Practice (MPP) programme arises from the diversity of professional experience of the leadership and capabilities of the facilitation team offered by Capable NZ. In addition, the Capable management process recognises that the student learning journey is a very personal one and that it is very important to provide an academic and professional match between student and facilitators that works.

In Alan's and my case, the relationship between was effectively established by the insight and wisdom of our Capable leader, Glenys Ker, at the time who recognised our shared values, our similar histories and the fact I was pursuing PhD studies. This provided a basis for easy confirmation of a formal relationship which has since built to become a lifelong friendship.

Some references concerning facilitation and the development of my model of facilitation

The origins of modern student centred learning was derived from the person centred psychotherapy practices of Karl Rogers in the middle of last century. In order to support student centred learning effectively, teachers started to provide facilitation processes to enhance learning outcomes. Some of the factors which were identified as enhancing its effectiveness (Motschnig-Pitrik & Holzinger, 2002) included:

- An authentic and real relationship between student and facilitator that enables the development of high level of trust in all communications between them
- A genuine acceptance of the student, their background and their existing learning and approaches to learning
- An empathetic and understanding approach to listening, interpreting and supporting their student's situation, processes and learning achievements.
- The facilitator is able to assist the students to identify their motivation for the area of learning by helping them recognise their learning needs and interests.

- The facilitator encourages the use of a wide range of resources that suit where the learner starts from and wants to progress to
- The facilitator embraces a humanistic philosophy by believing in and creating an environment which suits and encourages learners to explore and develop their interests

These factors also are shared by Malcolm Knowles in his concept of androgogy as cited by (Pratt, 1993) and how the design of androgogical processes should be undertaken with adult learners. Facilitators are likely to be more useful if they also belong to the Community of Practice a learner may be seeking to join

Boud (1994) places the role of facilitation in the context of learning from experience and that all learning stems from prior experience. It is important that facilitators understand how to get learners to connect to that prior experience and build on it using learning processes that involve noticing, modelling, practice and reflection in what Boud describes as the learning milieu or context. Facilitators can help draw attention to processes and their resultant impact by drawing a learner's attention to it and leaving them to make sense of it based on their praxis.

Another area of interaction between a Capable facilitator and their student involves some coaching. This is to support students on a new pracademic journey involving research, critical analysis and reflection and recognising how their own models can be evolved from a range and combination of academic models.

A brief appraisal of contemporary literature on coaching indicates that its modern interpretation and practice is very similar to if not indistinguishable from facilitation. Whitmore (2010) stresses the relationship between coach and those they are coaching as supportive, the style of communication as being open and equal, and that the focus is on enhancing future performance and not dwelling on past mistakes. He quotes Gallwey (2000), who defines coaching as unlocking people's potential to maximise their own performance. Coaching is no longer about instruction. The key role of a coach is to help the supported person to become aware in the broadest sense of what they are trying to achieve and to enable them to take increasing responsibility for their development. An interesting perspective on the psychology associated with successful coaching is provided by Seligman (2007) who proposed that the theory and practice of positive psychology provides a good way of assessing the practice of coaching as well as a range of evidence based measurements of its outcomes.

In her work on Understanding Sport Coaching, Cassidy, Jones and Potrac (2008), refer to the social dimensions of the coaching discourse and the work of Bourdieu (1997). They contrast the traditional coaching approach of scientific functionalism and its inherent inequality between coach and athlete with the need for a more holistic approach of a professional cadre based on shared humanistic values. The latter helps to capture the subtlety and richness of the social space within a community of practice and to acknowledge the variety of identities that are involved.

The above sources and my developing practice as a Capable facilitator and mentor have provided the following clues to my professional practice and an emerging model of coaching and facilitation:

- Our style of coaching is to be a catalyst for our students to become independent learners and to optimise their personal performance
- The coaching we undertake with our students is an experiential learning process for both coach and student in both common and diverse areas of capability development
- The relationship is enhanced when the coach has sufficient prior knowledge and experience in a given domain, that they are able to provide shortcuts to more rapid acquisition of both knowledge and practice
- There is a clear moral and ethical responsibility as a professional to ensure an appropriate relationship is fostered with each student so that they are encouraged to become part of a pracademic community of practice in which courage, integrity, perseverance, reflection and intellectual humility all play their part

- That narrative, storytelling, metaphor and analogy all have a role in helping to define the shared social space and identities involved and to keep revisiting the purpose of the student's Capable journey in terms of the whole and its parts
- The need for the Capable professionals to share their experiences with each other and to continually evolve our community of practice through our personal research and development

LEARNINGS FROM OUR JOINT PROCESS

A major part of Alan's project was to develop a new model of rapid product or service development that might be sustainable in today's environment. This has coincided with my research in my PhD for a framework that can underpin my study of professional learning. At the same time, prior work from my own MBA into human resource accounting and subsequently into Intellectual Capital provided mutually interesting areas of conversation to investigate current business paradigms and how such paradigms were and would be affecting business conditions in future. I am particularly conscious from both domains of business and education that we are seeking models of practice that are relevant in environments of accelerating change and where one can find underpinning axioms that are relatively stable. And this brings me back to what professionals do and how implicitly their functional capabilities remain stable. So from my description of a coach and facilitator above, the goal and strategy of our work with students is unchanging but our specific approaches change to suit the needs of every student.

The facilitation process was not simply confined to the process and generic outputs of work needed but also to the contents that needed to be considered. One specific insight in Alan's model of practice concerned the fact that markets in future would not so much be discovered but co-created so the mutual symbiosis between market needs and their suppliers would be achieved in partnership.

Another insight that has become more apparent recently is the realisation that the set of circular phases in Alan's model of practice of creating a product or service was illustrative first to a process of problem solving but analogous second to a learning process of a kind that I realised was fitting my PhD study. Thus more widely that a discussion looking at models in one field could analogously be used in another.

The combination of the above examples led still further to the insight that the focussed discussions we were engaged in were staircasing our personal as well as mutual understandings in a range of research and other developmental activities. This amplification process is now seen by me as a significant component of all my interactions with my student projects and their understanding of the relative significances of their components and their contribution to their whole learning journey.

AN EXCITING FUTURE

I am very pleased to have supported Alan to a new place where he sees an ongoing learning path ahead of him. This includes taking the work undertaken in his masters on into PhD studies as well as enabling him to operate strategically both nationally and internationally in his field of pracademic expertise. This includes ongoing personal links as well as professional links with our polytechnic's work and other areas of mutual interest.

The personal nature of all Capable's programmes is building a uniquely connected community of pracademics who are likely to be closely aligned and supportive in the development of the Polytechnic's future.

DR BEHNAM SOLTANI, AN OBSERVER

CONTEXT

Dr Behnam Soltani is a researcher with Otago Polytechnic and shares the same staff space as James Harrison on the campus. Due to his own research background into the principles and practice of social learning, he was aware of the types of social and learning interactions taking place between James Harrison and a number of his MPP students. Given his interest and experience in this field, it was felt that his perspective on the relationship and successful conclusion of Alan Dowman's journey with a distinction pass grade in his MPP programme would be useful to this case study.

OBSERVATIONS

It was very interesting as an independent researcher to observe a discussion between Alan and James to reflect on the MPP journey they had made together during the past 18 months.

What seems to be salient about their interactions are:

- The scope and depth of personal and professional respect that existed between the two of them.
- How the prior experience of both of them had merged and mingled during the MPP process to become a joint community of practice.
- How their interactions were staircasing their respective personal development in creative and significant ways.

James and Alan's narratives could be understood through what Lave and Wenger (1991) referred to as a community of practice perspective (CoP hereafter). Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992) defined a CoP as follows:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations - in short, practices - emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour. As a social construct, a CoP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.

The concept of a CoP starts with membership of a newcomer in a community. This could be through marriage, immigration, moving to a new company, or starting a new program at a tertiary institute. This process involves learning. Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) state that we learn to function effectively and appropriately in a CoP as befits our membership status. This is a process in which the new member takes a peripheral role first but little by little and if he/she chooses, he/she moves to become the core member of that community.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, James and Alan's relationship are understood through the membership of both Alan and James in the Capable NZ program. Both Alan and James belonged to Capable NZ community of practice, one as a candidate in a Master's program and the other as a facilitator. They both relied on their industry background and their current academic exercise to establish rapport early on in the process. They both had a shared interest and mutually engaged in an act of learning and reflection throughout their MPP program particularly through staircasing each other's learning. In this relationship, James socialized Alan into the practices of the MPP program where he could meet the expectations of a Master's degree in Professional Practice. Likewise, James learned from his own interactions with Alan and advanced his own thinking towards creating a model of learning for his own PhD studies.

Alan Dowman has a Master of Professional Practice – International Business with Distinction from Otago Polytechnic. He is also CEO of Inno-Ventive.

James Harrison BSc Hons, MBA has enjoyed an extensive set of careers in industry, the civil service, and Tertiary Education both here and the United Kingdom. This has included responsibility for the professional development for more than 2000 scientists, engineers and business professionals within a capital electronics company of GEC Marconi, one of four civil servants leading the UK vocational qualification changes in the late 20th century, deriving the NZ qualifications for the NZ Electronic Industry and delivering senior academic roles in the NZ tertiary sector. He is currently undertaking a part time PHD in Experiential Learning at Victoria University, Melbourne and acting as a facilitator and academic mentor in the Masters in Professional Practice programme at Capable NZ, part of Otago Polytechnic.

Behnam Soltani is a Lecturer at the Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus. He has a PhD in Applied Linguistics.

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