LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: EXPLORING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY GROWTH THROUGH WORK BASED LEARNING PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

Giddens (1991) tell us self-identity is not a distinctive trait possessed by the individual, but the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography; a reflexive project, portraying not what we are but what we make of ourselves (Giddens,1991). Autobiography is at the heart of self-identity, as self-identity presumes a narrative where the self is made explicit. In examining the relationship between identity, the work based learning approach used in Capable NZ (Otago Polytechnic) and the growth of professional identity in the learners, we call on a range of perspectives. This paper outlines this process and demonstrates outcomes for the 161 learners studied and our initial analysis of the data is presented here. In the process of facilitating learning which asks for identity exploration, reflection and autobiography, we find powerful examples of the strengthening of identity, the construction and growth of professional identity, and new visions of self. We can use these to illustrate these findings and inform us on the effects of our work in this educative process.

INTRODUCTION

There is much evidence to suggest learning by experience is a powerful educational technique (Kolb,1984, Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985, Andresen, Boud & Cohen, 1995, Moon 1999). Peter Jarvis and Stella Parker (2007) note that … 'learning is regarded as a phenomenon that takes place everywhere, every day of human life…it is in reality a 'major part of the incidentality of everyday life and of being human'(p.xiv). Vaill (1996) contrasts the commonplace institutionalized view of learning with learning as a way of being, which refers to the whole person, to something that goes on the whole time and extends into all aspects of a person's life. These views argue for the validity of learning that takes place outside formal education structures, and emphasises the seamless nature of its occurrence. Blustein (2014) agrees that work and non-work experiences are seamlessly experienced in the natural course of people's lives and this should be captured in scholarship and practice about working. ''The optimal discourse would be one that examines the lived experience of working which is conveyed in the language of people talking about their lives'' (p.8).

In academic qualifications at Capable NZ, reviews of learning undertaken in portfolio processes examine all the multiple roles of learner in work and non-work experiences– even that of the child, as most reviews begin with the early life influences. Experiences are examined, analysed, reflected on and interwoven into the current map of the learner's life. Concepts of career and work are revisited, the whole self is examined. These are the lived experiences in the language of the learner, with all the inherent influences of culture, faith, values, and learnings interwoven. Through the process of writing and reflection, the work and life journey of the learner becomes a source of understanding, a narrative of learning from all of life's sources, and part of a transformational path towards a revised understanding of self. Within this new identity the learner derives new understanding of the meaning

of their current work, gaining new perspectives of the depth and possibilities of who they are and what they do and why. In this process past work, however menial, takes on new meaning and value for its contribution to the present, community contribution is highlighted equally with paid work and a further nuance is that current work deepens in meaning as learners see new possibilities. Identity growth is one outcome, along with a new vision of the professional self, the professional identity.

Over time, the observations of our facilitators have indicated that professional identity is transformed during the course of the learners study, and this study extends this perception to explore in greater depth what the learners have experienced. This study explores the responses of 161 learners to their undergraduate work based learning process at Capable NZ. This paper first examines frameworks from the literature of identity, and professional identity. It then outlines the study and the Capable APL process, and considers the outcomes for the learners. The authors take a transdisciplinary approach, it locates this paper in the context of reflective learning, outlines this process and suggests outcomes for the learners in terms of professional identity development, career confidence, as well as the skills of continuous learning. These outcomes are exploratory and point to further research in these areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity

As noted in the abstract, Giddens' work is fundamental to understanding identity. Giddens (1991) describes the self as a reflexive project, portraying not what we are but what we make of ourselves. Reflexivity is the characteristic of the self that allows one to know both what one is doing and why one is doing it (Giddens, 1991). Autobiography is at the heart of self-identity, as self-identity presumes a narrative where the self is made explicit, and there is a capacity for the person to "keep a particular narrative going" (p.54).

In the 21st century environment of change with an interplay between the local and the global worlds, we believe there is a greater need for reflexivity. In a context of change, reflexive self-identity plays an important role in connecting the past and present of career actors and providing a narrative of unity and coherence in their lives (Weick, 1995). Trede (2012) points out that 'self-identity is developed with experience, who we are is our past.' (p.161).

Our particular focus is on the interplay between identity and career. Career and identity are strongly interwoven (Cochran, 1990), with career being described as a movement through "a series of situations which bestow identity on us" (Watson, 1980, p.47). We know that career refers to more than objective pathways or movements, it involves self-identity, and reflects individuals' sense of self - who they are, who they might wish to become, encapsulating their hopes and dreams as well as their fears and frustrations (Young & Collins, 2000). Occupations are a source of identity for people of all ages; and in a changing careers environment, identity is the feature of the self that will develop (or be threatened) in response to changing and challenging situations. Hall (2002) describes identity growth as a meta competency with two essential elements:

> One is the ability to seek and take in feedback information about one's self, to learn about one's strengths and deficiencies. The other element of self-identity is self-awareness, the extent to which one has a clear understanding of one's own values, goals, needs, interests, abilities and purpose. Thus, identity growth is not just knowing yourself but knowing how to learn more about yourself. (p.33)

This metacompetency forms the key foundation for effective career behaviours in a changing environment; it also underpins the work that is done in Capable NZ learning portfolios which asks for awareness of those very same elements of self-knowledge. We believe that this focus is crucial for developing professional identity, as outlined next.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Professional identity has been defined as one's professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences. This definition assumes professional identity forms over time through a person receiving insights and feedback from a range of varied experiences (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978).

Professional identity development involves the acquisition of new role behaviours and new views of the self. It is a systematic way of evaluating, identifying and organising the perception of self (Erikson, 1968); it can be framed within the context of social identity, or be concerned with group interactions in the workplace and relates to how people compare and differentiate themselves from other professional groups. It is understood to be dynamic and able to change through processes such as the ability to increase levels of self-awareness (Hall, 2002). Additionally, Trede (2012) explains the importance of identity for professional practice when she notes that the starting point for understanding self and others, and how a person is situated within a practice or profession, is the exploration and understanding of how one views the world. Self-becoming, as she calls it, leads to *'self-assurance, self-confidence and fosters intention and cohesion for professional identity development'* (p162). These concepts of identity and professional identity are important to understand because they relate directly to the aims of personal and professional development that underpin work-based learning and professional practice qualifications.

LEARNING AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Opportunities for personal reflection are critical to assist learners to extract the lessons of their learning environment (Hall & Mirvis, 2014).

This is best demonstrated in the following quote by Hall & Mirvis (2014) who note that

> one of the great ironies of most adult learning experiences is that they entail the investment of considerable resources (time, effort, and money) and much learning does in fact occur - but it is often not retained because the learner does not do the final work of 'getting up on the balcony' and reflecting on the experience and formally culling out the wisdom and lessons that he or she has gained (p.214).

Established Work Based Learning programmes have long included active reflection within the core modules; this usually involves purposeful reflection on work or study activities. However, in the process of portfolio work, reflection is the mechanism for gathering and integrating the past and present experience, life and work activities and skill acquisition of the learner. Our focus now turns to explaining how we are going to explore the concepts discussed in this literature review, via our exploratory study.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

Because the facilitators within Capable NZ had already gained many insights about this topic while working with learners, we decided to design a questionnaire based on these initial insights. The survey included questions on a range of areas, these were both open and closed. We asked all learners from year 2006 to year 2014 who had completed undergraduate study (BAppMgt and the BSS) at Capable NZ to complete the survey. The survey was administered via email to 423 learners of which 161 responded.

These 161 graduates provided survey responses (a response rate of 38%) on their learning experience after completing the Capable NZ learning portfolio process to attain an undergraduate degree. Surveys results were followed up with interviews of ten learners and examination of some portfolios. Our initial analysis of results of the surveys are presented in this paper.

By examining the personal narratives of graduates, we anticipated that we would gain further understanding about the construction of the new views of self, or professional identity and the learning that has taken place; as well as note other outcomes for future exploration.

Before presenting our findings, it is important to fully explain what the process is for work-based learning qualifications in Capable NZ. Work based learning qualifications typically involve the creation of a review of learning portfolio; and this reflective process draws the learner into significant identity exploration. Specifically the Accreditation of Prior Learning process at Capable NZ is an independent learning pathway that supports learners to meet the requirements needed for a qualification; in the case of the learners researched for this study for an undergraduate degree. Through facilitation and guided task sheets learners are supported to identify the learning experiences they have had that are relevant to the targeted qualification, to make explicit the learning from these experiences. and to make meaning of this learning in terms of a 'theory or model of practice. This model symbolises how they go about their professional practice and why, and what informs them in their practice. During this journey, the role of the facilitator is essentially one of supporting and guiding the learner to reflect deeply on their experiences.

The learning and reflection process is referenced to the graduate profile, the profile for any major/specialization being pursued, the path of study and the NZQA level descriptors and degree descriptors. From life experience, work, projects, training and formal education the learner unpacks and scopes their integrated experience, drawing out the underpinning knowledge, skills, philosophy, values, and beliefs which impact on their work; highlighting those which is their work at graduate levels. Learners use critical reflection and self-assessment to undertake what is both a personal journey of self-awareness and professional development.

As part of the process the learner structures at least two or three case studies (working roles) which illustrate a range of knowledge and skills relevant to the qualification they are pursuing. As they progress they reflect and respond to a number of questions: what was my role, what capabilities and skills did I use, what did I learn, how did I learn it, how do I relate this learning to training or literature in this field, how does this learning inform my work or current practice then and today?

FINDINGS

The sample ranged in age from 28 to 86 years of age and were at various stages of their career. Those who had finished their 'paid working life' were in voluntary/community support roles – 'giving back' to others. The 161 responses provided illuminating data on the process for those graduates, and the personal and professional outcomes for them in terms of their identity.

People tend to approach Capable NZ learning with an intent to improve their career prospects. Most are mature learners, who have significant skills and knowledge from a range of experiences in the workplace. They may have undertaken extensive training (in-house or external), will often have completed some or part qualifications, and hold senior positions in a range of contexts.

They describe themselves in a range of ways: 'I left school and got a job because I needed to support my family', or, because 'school just didn't do it for me', or 'I didn't learn 'that way', or 'I had done some study but I didn't see the relevance of it to the work I wanted to be in'. Many learners stated they were looking for validation of what they already knew. Some said they just 'took a chance and hoped for the best' that they would gain some recognition of what they had done prior. Some believed they had the skills and knowledge due to extensive experience, however had no idea how to pull that together to meet a qualification.

We now turn to examining the different stages of learners' typical reflections. The reflective work is done within a guided narrative with a number of stages: it begins with exploring early influences .

EXPLORING THE EARLY INFLUENCES

Learners are asked to "unpack your early influences, beliefs, values, views of self in the context of growing up – what are some of the things that spring to mind when you take yourself back there? What was important to you? Why? What did you believe? Who were role models and why?"

An example from a learner demonstrates their reflection on early influences:

> *On reflection, these values and learnings have probably shaped my world view, I guess they subconsciously continue to influence me, and underpin why I make the decisions I do, in my personal and professional life.*

More often than not, identifying with values and personal moral principles remains tacit and non-conscious (Nystrom, 2001). In this portfolio process, as illustrated by this quote, learners are asked to deliberately reflect on early experience, and made explicit their underlying beliefs and values. Their work is connected to family memories and values, embracing the personal realm, and taking stock of personal learning experiences. These experiences encompass family past and present, location, contexts and significant people who have been providers of learning.

UNPACKING WORK AND COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES

In the next phase of reflection, learners are asked about those areas of life 'where you have worked in and learnt about, made a difference to, had key learning and developed capabilities'…what was your role, what did you do, how did you learn, what was profound (great learning – good and bad), what came naturally and why? Where did this happen and who or what did you learn from– workplace, community, the sports field, lived events?' In the words of one learner:

> *I explored my values and my view of the world. I identified threads that have been entwined throughout my working life, my experiences and my drivers. It was only through writing …. that I discovered that coaching and educating were so important in what I do. My desire to change things, to step up and to influence was uncovered. My desire for a fair society that respects both the planet and those within it was teased out….. I explored my skills. With my prior learning assessment earlier this year I have extended the range of what I thought I could do. I am now peering over the opportunity and learning horizon.*

This illustrative quote shows the depth of understanding learners are able to achieve in this process as they identity their threads of career and highlight key skills and drivers of their achievements.

Both the Christchurch earthquake of 2011 and the Brixton riots of 1981 have featured in Capable learners' portfolios as profound learning events. Experience in sports at elite as well as community levels feature in leadership and learning experiences. In the work of portfolios, informal knowledge which may be often undervalued and ignored is investigated. Informal knowledge consists of one's underlying beliefs and values, and the 'tacit' knowledge that is generated for a particular context or events. Work experiences are also unpacked identifying the skills and attributes developed over time. Knowledge and skills gained formally and informally enjoy equal value and respect in the contribution to a learner's progress.

CONNECTING TO KNOWLEDGE, DEVELOPING AND INTEGRATING NEW LEARNING

At this stage, learners are encouraged to think about and give voice to how work and knowledge and informal learning has impacted on them, and the connections they have made through theories and models. They are also required to consider new learning, that is relevant for their future career development, and builds on what they already know in their field of study/work/career. In deciding what to learn they identify the new knowledge and

skills that will improve their understandings and insights in their current role or aspirational future roles, considering questions such as 'what would make you a better professional? what is necessary for you to grow and develop? Theory for new learning is chosen for the relevant interests and requirements of the learner, and negotiated with the facilitator to meet both the personal interests, and professional needs of the learner, and the academic requirements of the graduate profile.

Learner:

> What did I learn? I learned that I knew a lot more than I thought I did, which has helped me understand my own employability – it helped me to be able to clearly articulate who I am and what I can do and why. I learned that once you have experienced work it is not hard to then engage with theory – what is hard is to engage with theory when you don't have a base to practice on (how silly is that) – being able to reflect on and understand my practice, then apply it to theories was a transformational process … now that is learning.

As the quote shows, the learner who discovers the integration of learning of theory and practice is learning how to learn. As Moon, (1999) comments, in this process there is a meta competency at work, the learner is learning to learn by experience.

Another learner noted:

> I've discovered through the reflective process that while I understand human resource processes very well, my knowledge goes much further. I'm an advocate, a manager, a business person, a communicator and most significantly an educator. By combining all of these skill sets I'm able to be effective as a leader. I also know that I could learn and develop more in all those areas. Two of those areas are of significant interest for me in my own career development, they are areas I'd like to strive towards mastery in. As I progressed through the APL process I discovered that I could write, reflect and research in a critical way.

In the process of acquiring new knowledge, learners identify, analyse more deeply and synthesise their existing knowledge; and as they identify areas for future effort, many exhibit the desire for ongoing learning.

PRODUCING A MODEL OR FRAMEWORK OF PRACTICE

The final stage of the process is pulling it all together, connecting and interweaving the themes of the learners' personal and professional life: are they congruent? do they fit? are you what you have always been (notwithstanding life and experiences and gaining more knowledge), what are the threads that form the rich fabric of your life and practice?

The process of developing a model or framework of practice assists the learner to draw on the core of their identity, as they deliberately integrate their values and strategies for work. One learner's experience is as follows:

> I was amazed to realise that my work incorporated many areas of specialised work – social services, career practice, management and leadership – I am not just a career practitioner, I am many things. Therefore my model of practice is more than having an understanding of career practice, it is demonstrating my knowledge and skill in management, my beliefs about leadership and my understanding of the social services environment. I can be defined by having a multi-faceted interconnected and integrated approach to a range of contexts.

The quote reflects the complex insights available to learners as they reflect on and construct a current model of practice.

Trede (2012) comments:

> 'Every professional has a professional identity-the question is how conscious and purposefully chosen it is. It is impossible to imagine a professional without a professional identity. It is possible that there are professionals who cannot articulate their professional values and commitments, therefore cannot purposefully draw on the core of their identity (p159).

This resonates strongly with the rationale for the Model of Practice, the final stage of the process. In doing this Model, the learners, as professionals, are consciously examining, reviewing, and explaining their professional self and their future self, and learn to articulate and purposefully draw on who they are.

According to Reisetter, et al. (2004), professional identity is the view of self as a professional plus competence as a professional, resulting in congruence between personal worldview and professional view. Integration culminates in envisioning oneself as part of the professional community.

At the end of the learning journey we hear learners indicate in a range of ways a new professional identity: they have increased in their self-confidence and self-efficacy, and they have integrated their new self -awareness into their working roles and lives. They may reference the 'new me' and the 'old me'. They have new scripts for their lives which may change and evolve, but the reflective skills and analytical process of discovery remain with the learner, to rewrite again in the future.

Learner:

> 'so I just trusted the process and found it to be an enlightening journey of self-discovery, self-awareness and huge transformational change in understanding of self and work'.

Finally, the overall production of the portfolio brings its own specific learnings and rewards, including a heightened awareness of the connectivity of our life and work. Blustein (2014) notes that the many roles that we inhabit in life may intersect with others in both organised and random ways, thus creating a rich tapestry of life experiences (p.8) A portfolio for many learners is a visual record and analysis of this tapestry which provides tangible evidence of the 'new me' that they take forward into their future.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through this portfolio process learners are asked to deliberately reflect on experience and make explicit their underlying beliefs and values, and they synthesise both their formal and informal knowledge bases. The learners believe they can now articulate who they are, what they do, what they know and why they know it. Our findings suggest that professional identity does indeed grow and develop over the course of the learner's journey through Capable NZ's work-based learning approach.

In particular we found the process of facilitated portfolios contains all the factors that facilitate identity growth in the individual, as it heightens self-awareness, involves a rigorous self-assessment process, demands critical analysis, and is intensively reflective. Reflecting on learning achievements can empower the learner to make intelligent decisions about how to move ahead with their learning needs. We see evidence of an increased sense of self –a sense of inner knowing- a strong *who I am, an internal compass* (Hall, 2002) which impacts on the learner's ability to choose paths in keeping with their values and purpose, and adapt and thrive in the new and different work environments.

Our findings build on the work done previously by scholars in this area. For example, Trede's study (2012) explores the skills that are built when there is a purposeful development of professional identity in the curriculum. She notes that discourse about professionalism will enhance students' observations skills of the workplace and our study also showed this to be the case.

Brookfield (2012) takes this further with the observation that sharing, questioning and resolving of observations and experiences with others acts to shape the professional values that underpin professional identities. In the Capable process these conversations may occur between facilitator and learner. A further process mirrors the Capable learning process – the asking of inquisitive questions – a powerful tool for growth and other possibilities (Peavey & Hutchinson, 1992). These questions facilitate deeper thinking and assist the learner to connect their underlying thinking to what they are doing. Trede (2012) concludes that an unquestioned practice will breed an unquestioned identity, conversely, one can argue that the self-questioning processes and reflexive practice deliberately taught in this Capable process will encourage a questioned practice and professional identity. Thus our study also highlights the important role that facilitators have in being able to draw out learners reflections….

Learner:

> *"I think it was transformative. I think I have an increased self-awareness personally and professionally ….the transformative part of it for me was that I can recognize that my personality and my skills are unique to my way of being and I have an ability now to use them appropriately in the right context. I think that's the transformative nature of the qualification."*

While there is more analysis to do on our data, our initial findings are encouraging, suggesting that professional identity can indeed grow and develop over the course of study using Capable NZ's work based learning processes.

There is however more work to be done to look at the outcomes for learners in term of their increased professional identity over time. Further exploration could focus on a range of areas, such as the personal professional realm, facilitation processes, and exploring the contribution of this learning mode to a continuous lifelong learning approach.

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