Article

LEARNER AGENCY: EXPLORING PERSPECTIVES FROM NEW ZEALAND, DENMARK AND CANADA

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MOTIVATION AND PURPOSE

The purpose of this article is to explore and reflect on the changing professional practice of educator facilitator-mentors in relation to student-centred learning and learner agency in vocational institutions across three countries. The collaborative work stands against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and exploring different ways of delivering skills and competencies suited to the market and how to empower adult learners. We were motivated by our passion for learning from others, even if we had to meet online over three time zones rather than in person as before.

CONTEXT

Student-centred learning (SCL) is a term widely used in literature about the higher education sector and the delivery of services. It seems to be a catch-all for a broad group of pedagogical concepts and approaches focussing on the learner and their learning. At the core are active learning, deeply reflective and experiential learning, shifts in responsibility and accountability to the learner, learner autonomy, the physical environment where learning takes place, and more focus on the relationship between the learner and the teacher. In European policy, SCL aims at effective learning, higher learning outcomes, and the overall purpose is competencies suited for the labour market (European Higher Education Area [EHEA], 2009; Dakovic & Zhang, 2021). As a pedagogical approach, the purpose is wider, including deeper transformational learning, critical and humanist education and whole-person learning (Hoidn & Reusser, 2021).

Recently, the role of the teacher has seen more scrutiny; there is a clear move to see the teacher as a mentor-facilitator, focussing on the learner's learning journey rather than on the content being studied (Hoidn & Reusser, 2021). Interestingly enough, this concept is not new and can be traced back to the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the work of John Dewey, who linked problem-solving and learning with the pace being set by the learner, and the constructivist theories of Piaget and Vygotsky (Hoidn & Reusser, 2021; Lefrançois, 2019). However, what is missing from much of the discussion is the high dimensionality (many facets) of the identity of the learner and how that translates into the development of the relationships, the learning, and the assessment of progress and transformative outcomes. Even though we are only starting our investigative journey, we have already uncovered exciting aspects of what we would like to call the recognition and development of the learner's agency.

The concept of changing learner (and mentor-facilitator) *agency* is core to the approach we aim to follow. Part of what we hope to develop further, in the collaboration under the Global Polytechnic Alliance (VIA University College, n.d.), is how this concept is understood and perceived in each of the participating organisations. We plan to draw carefully on several resources as we continue this work. We are careful to state that this is a view that we use as a starting point for discussion, internally and externally.

THE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

We were invited during May 2021 to join a small and focussed group of researchers working in the SCL space within the Global Polytechnic Alliance (GPA). The GPA was established between like-minded organisations in 2018 when Otago Polytechnic (OP) signed a three-way agreement with the Humber College Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning (Humber College) Ontario, Canada, and VIA University College (VIA UC) Aarhus, Denmark. The aim of the agreement is to open up opportunities for collaborative studies for students and staff. The idea was, at the time, that people would have the opportunity to visit physically and interact with like-minded learners and professional staff around matters of mutual interest in the practice-based and work-based education environment. During the COVID pandemic, other ways had to be found to work around the restrictions on travel and interaction.

The invitation for collaboration in our case came from the Research Center for Quality of Education, Profession Policy and Practice at VIA UC, and the call was to initiate our research based on the question: *How can we move toward a joint research agenda for delivering professional practice programmes on the basis of the SCLT-review that makes sense both from a comparative perspective and from three, individual, institutional viewpoints?* The question was deliberately vague for our scoping study, and during the first meeting, we had the opportunity to meet as passionate individuals from the Northern and the Southern hemispheres.

We agreed early on that it was important to keep our group small. We all volunteered to take part when the call went out, and we believed that it would be best for those of us that saw the need for this work to continue until we had a better understanding of what we wanted to get our collective heads around and to develop comfortable dialogue and trust. The option was to exit if we believed we could not get traction around a common theme and not waste the time of too many in the process. And when the time came, and we did gather momentum, we would grow the kōrero (conversation together) to include more interested individuals. For now, it was up to us to refine the focus of our research collaboration.

PATHS TAKEN

The way we have gone about the process so far is interesting. From the OP side, we in New Zealand believe that we came to the conversation initially to listen, to contribute from experience, and to understand how we can enrich the learner journeys of those we facilitate on their work-based learning adventures. We had no preconceived ideas other than that. The teams from Humber College and VIA UC voiced similar positions and also added that they were under pressure to improve their practice and that they saw this as an opportunity to develop evidence-based strategies and plans for their institutions.

During the first six Zoom meetings (early morning in New Zealand, previous evening in Denmark and early afternoon on the previous day in Canada), we compared notes on what we understood under the concept of SCL; we compared notes on our policy frameworks that structure and direct our operations (at a very high level). We shared stories of working with our learners within ever-changing corporate structures and uncertainty using Starkey's model of three dimensions of student-centred learning: humanism, cognition and agency (Starkey, 2019). We identified *agency* as a key dimension to define jointly in the context of sharing what this meant to us in our contexts. Finally, through sharing our views, we developed an initial shared understanding of what seems feasible to create this summary of our learning from our practice.

The common ground is only starting to emerge. We hope that, rather than looking for an integration of ideas, a superposition of thought will develop in due course. In the next sections we reflect on our growing understanding in this journey.

Otago Polytechnic – New Zealand

As our discussion progressed, it was clear that we share a passion for the success of our learners. In the most recent presentation made by the OP team (Jan Hendrik and Steve), the Capable NZ values were covered, and we pointed out that they have a similar flavour to the 'Agile Manifesto' values for software development (Beck et al., 2001). For example, we value the learning process over the focus on disciplinary content, and although we value the focus on content, we value the learning process more. In essence, the approach is not to choose one over another but to choose both in a way that recognises the learner's *needs* being central to our efforts. This way of choosing BOTH in a relative (not relativist) context is a key aspect of the transdisciplinary philosophical position that we introduce a bit later. We acknowledge that the approach has implications for assessment practice, something that we hope to address in the future.

Our thinking is not radically different, we believe, to what our research partners aim to do. What we want to highlight is the richness that is specifically introduced by the bi-cultural socio-political landscape in New Zealand and how that richness shapes the context of the practice-based research our learners undertake. In New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika learners have been marginalised in the formal education system (Milne, 2016). This is due to the culture and place of the individual being overlooked when educators presume that all learners identify with the same or similar culture, despite recognising the detrimental effects of this disassociation (Hook, 2007). Inherent in this assumption is the entrenchment (conscious or otherwise) of neo-colonial attitudes and approaches (Smith, 2008). In Professional Practice learning in the context of work, programmes that are designed by Māori, for Māori and are delivered by Māori are providing optimal conditions for Māori learners (Te Maihāroa et al., 2021). This aligns with what Reeves (2007) suggested with the positioning of education and research for unlocking the potential for innovation. A more recent positioning paper by Macfarlane and Macfarlane discussed the need for cultural competence and safety in research endeavours, and it is clear that both learners and mentor-facilitators must be confident and ready to adopt "culturally-adept research practices" (2018, p. 76).

In this context, we have decided to define *agency* as the curated development of independent knowledge acquisition and identity development and empowerment. This is related to heutagogy or self-directed adult learning, which differs significantly from taught learning (pedagogy for children and andragogy for adults) (Heick, 2015). Note that we carefully avoided the notion of the individual (and autonomy) versus the collective in that definition. Our reasoning is that we need to consider different worldviews carefully, down to the use of language, metaphor and symbology.

It is perhaps helpful to look at how one could approach this from a transdisciplinary perspective based on an axiomatic set that considers knowledge as a forever open construct, that there are infinite lived realities, and that there is an inclusive logic that allows for opposing positions to be simultaneously held (Nicolescu, 2010). Such a perspective opens the door to considering world views from a position of equal validity.

The Māori worldview differs from Western worldviews and approaches. *Mātauranga Māori* includes cultural heritage and accumulated wisdom. Knowledge is seen as a gifted privilege and not a right and has spiritual connotations (Woller, 2013). Mika (2012) suggests that the ways in which mātauranga are being defined as knowledge undermines the notion of 'Being' and of a spiritual relation between 'Being and Knowing' and shows the challenge of a rational Western versus Indigenous world view. By considering the logic of transdisciplinarity, one can see the potential of working with both world views and the knowledge production inherent to both, which was highlighted in the government document by Reeves mentioned earlier. More importantly, it puts these views on equal footing, to be respected equally.

In another work, Nicolescu (2018) builds on these concepts and talks about *learning to be.* It is explained as an ongoing apprenticeship between mentor-facilitators and learners in a process of identity development. In our professional practice context, it resonates with *ako,* a traditional concept meaning both to learn and to teach (Morrison & Vaioletti, 2019). *Ako* is a relationship between knowledgeable people interacting to develop a

positive outcome for all, learning from each other as they share knowledge in a reciprocal framework of *manaaki* (support), *aroha* (respect) and *toha tukuroa* (reciprocity) (Davies & Eruera, 2009; Bishop & Glynn, 2000). These elements are encased in broader concepts of the individual strengths and needs of a learner (*tuakiri),* including reflective practice and discussion. It is flanked by *wānanga:* knowledge, wisdom, practice and responsibility (in the context of the past, the, present and the future); as well as a desire to create cohesion of thoughts and ideas and communities of practice (*kaupapa*).

These concepts are not necessarily foreign to the Western world view(s), and we posit that a post-modern worldview may be found to be congruent with many aspects of the Māori worldview. For example, it is encouraging to see how readily we resonate with the German terms that Hans-Georg Gadamer uses when he talks about experience, action, and critical reflection as necessary parts of learning: *die Erfahrung* – experience shaped in discourse and based on culture and history; *das Erlebnis* – lived experience and understanding the self; and *verstehen* – to understand – as the experience of Other in relation to Self (Béres, 2017). Clearly, experience is multi-faceted and being able to actively probe these dimensions in discussion with learners to develop gnoseology (multi-faceted knowledge) is a strong asset.

That brings us to the point where we consider agency and *mana* (prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power), as different AND the same (and something we hope to explore as a thesis in our collaboration). Manaakitanga is described as behaviour that acknowledges the mana of others as having equal or greater importance than one's own through the expression of aroha (compassion, empathy), hospitality, generosity and mutual respect. Only if our concept of agency considers manaakitanga and the preservation and acknowledgement (even enhancement) of mana can we consider learners on equal footing. What still needs unpacking is the deeper implications of mātauranga Māori as inclusive of cultural heritage and collective, cumulative wisdom, mana gifted and spiritual, and how our mentor-facilitator practices must develop to include it.

As a part of the restructure of the New Zealand polytechnic network underway, since 2020 the New Zealand government has recognised indigenous learners as "priority learners" in an attempt to overcome historic injustice and marginalisation, with the goal of Māori facilitating Māori (Te Pūkenga, 2021). An early outcome of this restructure is Māori, Pacific, and disabled learners will access new mentoring and early out-reach/connection services in most regions which focus on increasing access, participation, and retention across the network (Te Pūkenga, n.d.).

The insights from a Danish and Nordic perspective are shared next by our collaborators in Denmark, and are also a reflection of European development.

VIA University College – Denmark and Europe

In a Danish and Nordic pedagogical tradition, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of content for the individual's formation process (*Bildung*). The process is not valued over the content, and should not be seen as an either/or. With references to Kant's concept of autonomy, German pedagogy, Humboldt's University, Gadamer's formation process and Klafki, it is through the encounter with the science and the cultural creations, and thus the content of teaching, that human beings develop a sense of the true, right and beautiful – and are formed into autonomy and enlightened self-determination (Klafki, 2016).

Alongside this tradition, the Frankfurt School and the critically liberating pedagogy has left clear traces in European and Danish education, and thus also in the reasoning for the spread of SCL in European education policy (Hoidn & Reusser, 2021; European Students' Union [ESU], 2015). Critical theory and the student rebellion in the 1970s thus form the basis for democratic elements in the Danish education system, with the spread of student councils, student organisations and committees, and for a pedagogy that aims at agency and autonomy. Thus, in the statutory purpose of the Professional Bachelor's Degree Programs, the development of independence and autonomy is clearly stated.

In an existential philosophical understanding of pedagogy, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has been important for a distinction between becoming something – becoming skilled, competent and knowledgeable, and becoming someone – becoming oneself and developing a 'self that relates to himself' and strives for an ethical life. This way of thinking, resonating with Nicolescu's (2018) learning to be, is in a more postmodern competence thinking emphasising the ability to relate professionally to one's work (here educational practice), which in this context means to orient oneself according to the higher purpose of one's own practice (Hammershøj, 2017).

The before-mentioned traditions and perspectives also coexist with a special Danish folk high school movement and The Enlightenment with a focus on the significance of the narrative, the word and the community for building identity. The folk high school and the concept of non-formal adult education is associated with the Danish philosopher, poet, educational thinker and theologian, Grundtvig, and his thoughts concerning free educational opportunities, and is one of the special features of the Danish educational system.

The Danish and European philosophical and pedagogical tradition of *Bildung* (formation) and *Mündigkeit* (authority/autonomy) can – in the encounter with constructivism – be said to be challenged and repressed (Biesta, 2015; 2021 on 'learnification'), but also to be supplemented with a nuanced concept of learning. Thus, experimental and exploratory learning with reference to John Dewey's concept of educative experience, as an experience creating connections between a student's learning experiences and student's future decisions and behaviour, has greatly influenced problem-based learning at Danish vocational colleges and universities.

Educational constructivism from Piaget to Vygotsky and to Lave and Wenger has spread the concept of learning and has meant an increased focus on the learning processes and outcomes; however this is not simply rooted in psychology and learning theory. With the Bologna Process, European education policy has identified effective and lifelong learning as the overriding goal of higher education in the European Union. It is with this background that SCL is being implemented in the Danish education system as a requirement. With references to European communiqués, policy reports and quality standards (EHEA, 2015), the Danish Accreditation Institution (2017) has ordered the educational programmes to practise and document SCL, but without a specific stipulation or definition of what constitutes such learning processes. In the mentioned reports, SCL is very broadly defined as activating, motivating and participation among students in active processes (ESU & EI, 2010; ESU, 2015), which is justified by labour market-relevant competencies, critically liberating pedagogy, and reform pedagogy, amongst others.

However, in a recent report from the European Commission, the emerging concept of *agency* plays a central part: "This report defines student-centered learning and teaching (also referred to as SCLT) as an overarching approach to designing higher education processes, which is founded on the concept of student agency" (Klemenčič et al., 2020, p. 8). References are made to transformative learning, deeper learning outcomes, inclusive curriculum and pedagogy, and flexible learning pathways. It remains an open question to us, however, as to how we can understand agency in an educational context with standardised learning outcomes such as generally formulated learning goals, and how we in the education system can contribute to the students' development of agency without falling into a traditional individualistic thinking and pedagogy. This forms the basis for continued discussions and sharing of perspectives in the research group, and potentially also for empirical comparative studies which can contribute to common knowledge from our different contexts.

Humber College Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning – Ontario, Canada

Following on from the views from Otago Polytechnic and VIA, we found that the most interesting aspects of our collaboration were listening, learning and understanding multiple points of view and perspectives and then slowly bringing them together into a new approach to our practice here at Humber College. In North America, student-centred learning and teaching (SCLT) is called the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). It is a commitment to improving teaching and learning in Higher Education. The SoTL is a hybrid between a

profession and a discipline in that it is both a foundational body of knowledge and a developmental process for enlivening evidence-informed practice in the college classroom. As Humber College welcomes new industry and professional experts to its faculty, they become members of the teaching profession. The SoTL at Humber College is a place for continual professional learning for faculty and advancement of the field of teaching and learning through meaningful publication and knowledge-sharing opportunities. In April 2021, we undertook a complete redesign of our SoTL programmes and started to integrate them with our growing Applied Research practices.

The ongoing conversations with our GPA colleagues provided much food for thought; we needed to merge scholarship and praxis so that they continue to inform each other in a continuous cycle of exploration. Tasked with growing a teaching-oriented college's research culture presents both challenges and opportunities. Challenges include shifting institutional and personal preconceptions of who and what can be included in an 'official' research programme. Opportunities include designing innovative learning programmes to engage non-traditional and emergent researchers in developing meaningful and viable research practices.

For research and innovation learners, developing self-awareness is critical (Jarvis, 2006; Mezirow, 2009). Studies have pointed to a lack of self-awareness as a hindrance for emerging researchers when they attempt to design and build useful research and innovation projects; develop formal research practices; and/or optimise helpful community relationships to support their initiatives. Inspired by our ongoing conversations, elements of existing graduate-level programmes, self-awareness models, and insights on related undergraduate programme challenges, we created a one-year pilot of an innovative research curriculum design and engaged a purposive sample of recent graduates, employees, and faculty.

To drive innovation, we knew that an organisation must strengthen its adaptability and responsiveness to the unpredictable environment by integrating its capability for learning (Moustaghfir & Schiuma, 2013). Our ongoing search suggested that in order for an organisation to learn, that transformation and innovation are directly related to a person's capacity for innovation and learning (Sullivan, 2011; Wang & Ellinger, 2011; Grant, 2017). We sometimes forget that organisations are made up of people first.

Four new programmes have been piloted over the past year and will be offered to start in September 2022 in our faculty. These will form part of Humber's new 'Inclusive Research and Innovation Design' certificates. Our faculty will be able to take one or all four of the Humber certificates. We started with the 'Whole Self' – what would it mean to bring all of your previous life experience and your personal value system into a research practice? How would that differ from a traditional academic course in research methodology and methods? We learned much from the Māori perspective of combining cultural heritage with accumulated wisdom. We considered, and are still pondering, how agency plays a part in the process of building a research culture from the ground up. Our industry faculty bring much expertise; our task is to incorporate that knowledge into educational pedagogy AND keep the passion for the subject matter intact. Next, we then added a personal research project to allow these novice researchers to explore. The explorations led to questions, and those questions were then answered with pedagogy. First experience to create a context and container for the learning, then add learning theories and the cycle continues, ever informed by the experience (Kokkos, 2020).

The second part entails further exploration into how the faculty members bring that newly created understanding into a community of practice – whether it is the classroom and/or colleagues also engaged in exploration. Our belief is that we must shift from a traditional teaching paradigm to a transformative learning and teaching model that incorporates deep learning and reflective practice.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As our discussions online over the uncomfortable time zone differences continued, we discovered that we are passionate about the development of our own practice to serve our learners and organisations better. We identified a common theme around the concept of learner agency and what that may mean in our different cultural contexts. This is an important focus for all of us, and we hope to continue our work while bringing more collaborators on board.

The cultural differences and approaches emerged quite clearly, but so did our common aim to focus on empowering outcomes for learners. We see these as opportunities to explore how a more inclusive pool of thought can be allowed to develop around transdisciplinary heutagogy and specifically learner agency.

We also learned much from this pandemic, and the accompanying uncertainty and ambiguity that this has and will create is changing the skills needed to thrive. A number of beliefs underpin the development of this mindset (adapted from Grant, 2017):

- In our current context of this global pandemic (2020) as twenty-first century learner/leaders we need to inspire as opposed to motivate. This ability to inspire is determined by our integrity of character (who we are, what we stand for, and how we act); our alignment of purpose and our ability to create the presence of trust.

- Authenticity and integrity occur when we develop self-awareness through ongoing self-reflection together with an ability to pay attention to others (empathy) and the current context in which we find ourselves. This attentiveness enables us to examine a situation from all angles and communicate a clear vision of what needs to be done. We "walk our talk."

- As twenty-first century learner/leaders, we need tools to help us become more reflective and attentive. We need to journey into our own hearts, minds and psyches to discover our core beliefs and perceptual filters to better understand and use the shared myths and stories that align and inspire an organisation to perform beyond the norm.

- Organisational transformation is achieved one person at a time. We as leaders and our organisations must focus on nourishing our human assets as human beings, or better still, as human 'becomings.' Ever evolving. Ever adapting. We need to develop our people's inner capacity for self-awareness and conscious choice making; otherwise, old behavioural patterns, which cause resistance to change, will persist. Never forget – assets now have feet.

- Our organisations will not achieve the results we desire unless our practices, policies and procedures reflect our espoused values and purpose. Those values need to be aligned with our employees and other key stakeholders. We need a growth mindset of 'both/and' – not 'either/or.'

We think a gift given by this pandemic has forced all of us to slow down and contemplate what really matters. That answer lies in front of us and is a story yet to be told. We look forward to our further collaborations. We have learned much and are grateful.

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Anju Kakkar, a poet and storyteller at heart, is energized by the values of higher purpose, spirituality, mindfulness, inclusivity and collaboration. As Research & Innovation Specialist and Managing Editor of Humber Press at the Office of Research & Innovation at Humber College, Anju works closely with the Dean, Associate Deans and team in building a culture of care, community and inclusivity through the lens of research and innovation. Anju adopts a human-centred approach to solving problems that lead to sustainable and innovative solutions. She is a Green Belt Innovation 360 Licensed Practitioner (IMGB™) – in preparation for Black Belt (IMBB™), an MBTI Licensed Practitioner and a Values Perspective Coach. With a career that spans 25+ years, Anju is the Managing Editor of Humber Press at Humber's Office of Research & Innovation. A certified innovation expert with access to the leading ISO-compliant innovation management methodology by Innovation360 Group, Sweden, and an emerging researcher in the field of social innovation, she is driven by the values of purpose, inclusivity and collaboration (linkedin.com/in/anjukakkar).

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