Identities of place: Their power and consequences for VET

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My strength.
The strength of that land.
You can feel it in yourself, you belong there.
It's your country, your dust, your place.
(Rose et al, 2002, p. 168)

Abstract

In these times of 'flexible delivery' and the rise of e-learning, the roots grown through a person's identification with their physical localities - their places - seem to be increasingly de-emphasised. The power of place certainly includes attachments to these virtual places, which are increasingly significant activities of contemporary life that include e-learning. However, it is the intention of this paper to tease out the strand of work on identities of place which is part of the broader framework on identity in VET learning already established by Falk and Balatti (2003). The literature and concepts around place-identity/ies are described, including some related specifically to Australian Indigenous senses of place. Nine examples to demonstrate the importance of place identity to VET and the need for further research in this area are then discussed. Place theory in our view has an enormous and as yet untapped potential to further our understanding and improvement of VET practices. Place theory has considerable relevance in many VET related contexts, not only the Indigenous-specific ones.

About place-identity

This paper presents a discussion about place-identity and its significance for VET learning that suggests the need for research in this area. The paper builds on research (e.g., Falk & Balatti, 2003; Falk, Golding & Balatti, 2000; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000) into the role of identity in the learning process, and how the various dimensions of identity, of which place-identity is one, impact on learning effectiveness.

As summarised here and argued elsewhere (Falk & Balatti, 2003), identity and learning are somehow linked. The linking seems to be what Gerber (2001) describes as "common sense" (p. 72). Educators understand intuitively that the learning of their students involves 'moving from the known to the unknown' – that is, that learning is affected by 'who they are' and that 'who they are' is somehow affected by how and what they learn. Since Erikson's (1975) ground-breaking work on conceptualising identity both as a lifework of the individual and as a lifework located in community and, more generally, society, the disciplines of psychology and sociology have produced many theories of identity that have informed what we understand about learning.

For example, developmental psychology has produced stage models of adult development. From social psychology there is social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explaining how our group memberships go

toward defining who we are. Environmental psychology (e.g., Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Proshansky et al, 1983) has given us theories of place-identity that explain how the question of *Who am I?* is tied to a second question of *Where am I?*, and it is to the specific aspect of place theory as a component of the broader dimensions of identity that this discussion paper will return to shortly.

To complement psychology's focus on the individual, sociology's contribution to understanding identity has been in great measure a response to the questions of how much and in which ways are people at the mercy of the structure and culture of society and to what extent they have agency. The macro-sociological or structural perspective holds identity to be a construction produced by societal systems and structures with individual agency being downplayed. In contrast, most work from the micro-sociological or interactionist perspective maintains that it is individuals who fundamentally define who they are through the meaning making that takes place in their social interactions.

Theorists such as Bourdieu (habitus), Habermas (critical theory) and Giddens (structuration theory) have produced understandings of identity that link or integrate the macro and micro perspectives. Attention to the role of language and discourses by poststructuralists and others has done likewise. Anthropology is making a strong contribution to understandings about place-identity, especially in connections with studies about Indigenous knowledge and identity concerning place (e.g., Christie, forthcoming; Rose et al, 2002). Ethnomethodology has also contributed to the understanding of identity because of what Hilbert (1990, p. 805) describes as its indifference "to structure at any level and likewise to any kind of 'linkage' problem" and its focus on "concrete empirical social practices wherein both macro- and microstructures and their interrelations are produced, reproduced, used, and managed".

Post-colonial theory (e.g., Ashcroft et al, 1995) adds another layer of meaning to place, identifying place as crucial in the colonial/post-colonial places that people inhabit. Post-colonial work has contributed strongly to the breadth of work on place and its significance to multitudes of displaced peoples over time.

As a result of the existing research on identity from which this paper expands (Falk & Balatti, 2003), Figure One was developed to summarise the full range of identity dimensions, of which place is one, that are implicated in learning.

Figure 1: Dimensions of identity in learning

Processes applied to experience	Categories of experience for identity in learning (Sources)			Identity resources produced from the processing of experience
Interacting and storying through	**Individual**	**Group**	**Place**	
Anticipating *Choosing* *Creating* *Evaluating* *Experiencing*	Age Appearance Education Health	Class Communities Consumer Ethnicity	Buildings Built environment Climate Dwellings	Behaviours Beliefs

Feeling *Performing* *Redefining* *Remembering* *Talking about* *Thinking*	Name Physicality Sexual orientation Spirituality Time Voice	Family Gender Language Occupation Profession Religion Work	Geography Institutions Landscape Natural environment Neighbourhood Work places	Feelings Knowledges

As explained in Falk and Balatti (2003), the *Processes* column describes the interactive or 'doing' dimension of identity formation, reformation and co-construction that occurs in learning. The list points to some of the more significant ways in which the two key processes of identity building - storying and interacting in the present - take place. The next three columns – Individual, Group and Place - show the categories of experience from which identity resources are generated by the processes listed in Column One. The last column identifies the different categories of identity resources that are called on and/or generated in learning through the processes of interacting and storying.

From this short overview of the literature on identity, the paper now moves to focus on the literature related specifically to place-identity, as one of the key dimensions of the overall construct of 'identity'.

Place-identity: Literature overview

It is a precondition for effective learning that its provision resonates with what the learner already knows and understands, then relates this body of 'known' resources to the 'unknown' elements of the learning provision. This summarises the maxim of good learning that pervades the literature (e.g., Bransford, 1979) based on the principle of 'working from the known to the unknown'. Of course, what has not been adequately explored in the research is the various dimensions of 'what is known'. Most of the literature addresses the 'known' as the learners' existing knowledge base, but more recent research (e.g., Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Rose et al, 2002; Wenger, 1998) points to the significance of existing identity resources, and the affect they seem to have on learners' preparedness/desire for new identity resources. This strand of research therefore helps to tease out the underlying dimensions of the platitude about learning as starting from the known and moving to the unknown.

Place-identity is discussed here for two reasons. Firstly, in comparison with social identity, personal identity or self-identity, there is much less written on place-identity and nothing that we could find about its relevance to learning. Secondly, it is discussed here because we believe it is relevant to learning and the outcomes that can be achieved through learning for individuals, communities and organisations. When people interact— and learning occurs through interaction (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000)—they interact with both human and non-human elements of their entire environment. Place is the physical setting component of that environment and as Korpela (1989) explains, attachment to place or place-belongingness is the basis for place-identity (p. 246).

Sarbin (1983) notes that "social identity and place-identity (answers to *who am I?* and *where am I?* questions) are ordinarily inseparable" (p. 339). "Places", Sarbin explains, serve as "contextual markers for establishing one's social identity" (p. 339). Proshansky et al (1983) who produced the first detailed and still often quoted psychological theorisation of place-identity describe it as follows:

> To begin with, it is a sub-structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of, broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being. (Proshansky et al, 1983, p. 59)

They go on to say that:

> …what emerges as 'place-identity' is a complex cognitive structure which is characterized by a host of attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, meanings and behavior tendencies that go well beyond just emotional attachments and belonging to particular places. …Place-identity as a cognitive sub-structure of self-identity consists of an endless variety of cognitions related to the past, present, and anticipated physical settings that define and circumscribe the day-to-day existence of the person. (p. 62)

Examples of place-identity cognitions that contribute to one's definition of self include a sense of belonging, 'rootedness', and norms and values about crowding, one's own space, privacy and territoriality. Proshansky et al list five functions that place-identity has in the thoughts, behaviour and experience of the individual. Included in the list for example, is a group of cognitions that serves a recognition function. This "provides an environmental past against which any immediate physical setting can be judged" (1983, p. 66). One implication of this function is that threats to self-identity occur when people are uprooted and put in alien environments. In summary, Proshansky et al (1983) conceive place-identity as:

> …clusters of positively and negatively valenced cognitions of physical settings. The substantive and valuative natures of these cognitions help to define who and of what value the person is both to himself and in terms of how he thinks others view him. (p. 74)

Twigger-Ross & Uzzell (1996) note that the literature relates place to identity in two different ways. They stress that place-identity is not to be confused with the use of place as a social category. In the latter, place identifications are seen as a type of social identification, that is, people would see themselves as belonging to a group by virtue of the location of that group. An Australian example of this is evident in the Melbournian and Sydney-sider talk of belonging to their respective cities.

Rather than place-identity being just one aspect of identity as theorised by Proshansky et al (1983), Twigger-Ross & Uzzell (1996) would argue that "all aspects of identity will, to a greater or lesser extent, have place-related expectations" (p. 206). To illustrate its ubiquitousness they use an established process model of identity (Breakwell 1986, 1993, in Twigger-Ross & Uzzell 1996) to explain how attachment to place influences identity. Using Breakwell's four principles of identity—distinctiveness for a person, continuity across time and situation, a feeling of personal worth or social value and self-efficacy—they review the literature related to place-identity to see the extent to which attachment to place functions to support and develop aspects of identity and they then apply the model to empirical research. To take self-efficacy as an example, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell would suggest that "feelings of self-efficacy are maintained if the environment facilitates or at least does not hinder a person's everyday lifestyle" (p. 208). This would imply "that when an environment is perceived as unmanageable it constitutes a threat to self-efficacy". (p. 208). Twigger-Ross & Uzzell concluded that the "environment becomes a salient part of identity as opposed to the merely setting a context in which identity can be established and developed" (p. 218).

In contrast to the focus on self taken by most theorists of place-identity, Dixon and Durrheim (2000) theorise place-identity using discursive approaches to social psychology. They state that places in environmental psychology and human geography are being "re-conceived as dynamic areas that are both socially constituted and constitutive of the social" (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000, online). This approach views place-identity as a social construction "that people create together through talk" rather than a personal construction of the individual. Consequently, Dixon and Durrheim explore the language and politics associated with place-identity.

Fullilove (1996) calls on place-identity to understand the psychiatric implications of displacement such as that of alienation. She explains that "one's place must be understood according to its symbolic construction by those within the place and by the larger society. The soundness of individual place-identity rests on having a place and on knowing that one's place is held in esteem by others. When identity is betrayed in either of these ways, alienation may result" (p. 1520).

The field of Indigenous studies provides another set of research that shows both the complexity and the importance of place-identity in learning. Rose et al (2002) illustrate the centrality of place for the MakMak clan of the Northern Territory in Australia showing the interconnections between place, culture and learning. Following on from the quote from the MakMak people at the head of this paper, are the following words:

> You remember the old people.
> The white eagles always greet me.
> It's home.
> Safety and security.
> You see the birds, you see the country,
> And your senses come back to you.
> You know what to do and where to go. (p. 168)

We see in this quotation from an extensive and longitudinal research study on Indigenous relationships with their land and traditions the explicit importance of place to 'learning'. Here belonging to place produces knowledge: "You know what to do and where to go", for knowing is a key outcome of learning.

Christie (forthcoming) makes the point about the relationship between identity and the learning of what constitutes traditional Indigenous cultural knowledge in Australia. He refers to another traditional Indigenous clan's philosophical base:

> … identity is contingent upon one's father's and father's father's ancestors, who sang, danced, cried and spoke the particular features of your own land and your own people into existence as they passed through the land and sea, making the world knowable and inhabited. Every Yolngu claims and celebrates their identity through these land-based language and culture complexes. Identities must be preserved and foregrounded in the production of knowledge… (p. 2)

Rather than viewing place-identity as being more important for some than others in our society, it is an assumption of this paper that place-identity is central to all people, whoever they are and wherever they live and work. It is part of this assumption that the differences between groups' attitudes and activities around 'place' relate to the *ways place is seen to be valued,* the ways place is daily constructed through learning activities (or "…the production of knowledge", as Christie (forthcoming) more specifically alludes to as learning). The ways in which 'place' is constructed through the production of knowledge are as manifestly varied in quotidian interactions as they are in the more formally recognised 'learning' interactions, wherever they occur, be they training rooms, classrooms or community settings. What is often not explicit is the degree to which different cultural settings value those activities related to place-identity. For example in many western societies, 'place' is governed by the legal system of written literacy practices of statutes, laws and tiers of judicial structures (think of the printed sets of laws relating to property rights, for example, as one instance of how literate practices entrench western people's valuing of 'place'), while in many Indigenous societies, these same legal traditions and the values they relate to are carried intergenerationally through performative practices containing strong oral components.

Post-colonial theory adds considerable breadth and depth to the research on place, identifying place and its relationship to peoples' languages and histories as vital elements in the ways people construct their identities. For example, Ashcroft et al (1995) describes the importance of place theory in these terms:

> Place and displacement are crucial features of post-colonial discourse…. place in post-colonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment. (p. 391)

Displacement in connection to place in post-colonial theory refers to the lack of fit between language and place. This applies to both those dispossessed of their land and

places, as well as those who have moved from their home places to 'the colonies' as colonisers.

The role of identity in learning as represented in Figure One and the subsequent literature review on place-identity suggest that issues of place have an enormous and as yet untapped potential to further our understanding and improvement of VET practices. Given the relationship Indigenous peoples have with place as outlined above, the relevance of place-identity to the Indigenous VET experience appears self evident. However, there are many VET related areas that suggest the relevance and importance of place-identity for effective VET learning.

Nine illustrations of importance of 'place' for VET learning

The nine examples noted below are used primarily to illustrate the notion of 'place' and its importance in VET learning and its provision. Some do illustrate the various dimensions of place-identity forwarded in Figure One and/or aspects of theory described earlier, but this is their secondary purpose.

(a) The co-location of TAFE campuses and schools
In recent years we have seen an increasing number of instances where TAFE and schools have been established on the same geographical campus. In addition to financial and pedagogical considerations, issues of accessibility have also motivated these new designs of educational provision. Accessibility in terms of physical access and just as importantly, emotional and sociological access, can be better understood through place-identity theory. In particular, it alerts us to the presence of beliefs and feelings that lead learners to experiencing different senses of belonging and attachment to places that offer post-schooling education.

(b) Socialisation of tradespeople through learning communities in areas such as chefs in kitchens, mechanics in workshops, administrative assistants in offices
In research into VET learning in the 'place' of a plumber's work on a building site, Falk (forthcoming) demonstrates the impact of place on the effectiveness of VET learning. Aspects of place-identity that are made clear in this research include the close (inseparable) relationship between effective learning and context factors (place). One example cited from this research is the way in which identity development as 'a plumber' and on-site learning are inextricably interrelated. Put another way, the research shows that non-place-based VET learning cannot provide effective learning in the dimensions of identity that impact on being a plumber. In regards to Figure One's column referring to place, the plumber's apprentice confirms the centrality of place-identity in these areas: buildings, the built environment, institutions, neighbourhoods and workplaces.

(c) Practices and issues around industry placements
The value of industry placements has been identified particularly in terms of the identity resources (behaviours, beliefs, feelings and knowledges) produced when learners gain experience from working with more experienced members in a vocational group. Also,

many of the challenges encountered by learners with industry placements can be seen in terms of how new identity resources (the yet unknown) can be added to the existing student capital of identity resources (the known) and even in terms of how some of the existing identity resources can be removed. Figure One above suggests that many categories of experience other than the specific one of work may be pertinent in planning learning interactions. In particular, it points to the categories of experience associated with the physical place. Place-identity theory proposes that identity resources support the existing known 'real life' learning that is derived from experiencing the physical settings of workplaces – the physical spatial layouts including the sounds, smells, visuals, and textures.

(d) VET in schools-is this a contradiction in terms?
The recent 'appropriation' of VET by the schooling system has arguably transformed the VET experience in a number of ways. Collectively, these ways can be described as the 'schoolification' of VET. One means by which this may be occurring is through the physical space in which most of VET in school takes place – that is, the school classroom located in the schoolyard. As a learning space this is fundamentally different from the physical space in which VET occurs in the workplace or in a TAFE institute. Because the school classroom provides a different source of place related experience from that of the workplace or the TAFE say, it could follow that the identity resources called on by VET in schools and produced by the classroom experience are not the same as those activated in other places. Place-identity theory is one useful way of exploring the extent to which the VET experience in school is, or may be, different from other VET experiences.

(e) Learning implications of displacement for Indigenous students who relocate for training and/or work purposes
Stewart (forthcoming) analyses the long-term impacts on learning for Indigenous students located on an island off Australia's mainland. She finds clear and unequivocal evidence that place-identity both determines and regulates learners' attitudes towards, and management of, their further experiences with training and work when re-located away from their island home. Moreover, the learners' identities of place have embedded within them characteristics that have health and well-being outcomes, and are not to be simply ascribed to 'being homesick'. Place-identities in this research is a powerful determinant both of educational and work success, and of subsequent healthiness and personal well-being.

(f) Implications of teaching in remote Indigenous communities for trainers
In a recent NCVER project (Kral & Falk 2003), features related to Indigenous peoples' place identities were found to be major determinants of the health of the community, healthy people within the community, and of the effectiveness of the learning to achieve community-determined needs. The strong relationship between identities of place and traditional culture in this study therefore confirmed the findings of Rose et al (2002) already reviewed in the first part of this paper.

(g) Sustainability of rural and regional communities
In extensive, intensive and longitudinal studies of rural communities across Australia (e.g., CRLRA 2000; CRLRA 2002a; CRLRA, 2002b), people's identification with place conceived as their communities proved to be a chief determinant of the usefulness and applicability of all learning provisions (compulsory and post-compulsory). In fact, it was found consistently that provisions for and quality of learning were enhanced by the community developed notion of a common purpose that defined the scope and sequence (and indeed the impacts) of the learning in relation to their places.

An outstanding community and VET example of place-identity being drawn on and generated in pursuit of sustainability is the "Line of Lode" project of Broken Hill (Balatti et al, 1999). The Line of Lode is a community-owned project that has turned the former mine site into an educational resource and tourist attraction. It is a place of enormous historical, cultural, social and economic significance for its employees and for the community generally. Ex-miners and school-leavers have been trained to be tourist guides, curators, oral historians, maintenance workers, researchers, functions coordinators and administrators. Trainees spoke of their strong and vibrant relationship with the mine site and how it inspired them to learn the necessary skills to work toward giving it new life as an interactive museum and tourist attraction. Evident in their talk was the storying of their own, their parents' and even their grandparents' previous attachments to the Line of Lode when active mining was taking place. Also evident were new identity resources (e.g., pride and optimism about the site) signalling a redefinition of their attachment to a place that would continue to offer identity definition but in different ways.

(h) Physical design of learning places and spaces
Attention to the physical design of learning places has been given higher priority in schools especially primary schools than in post-schooling environments. In a recent action research study (Balatti et al, forthcoming 2004), a TAFE institute attended to the design of the physical space in which literacy classes for people seeking employment were conducted. The new design, called a "learning lounge", incorporated a permanent multi-use space, a kitchenette, a casual reading area and a grassed outside area. The impact on attendance and quality of participation was very significant. From a place-identity perspective, student attachment to the new learning place came from a sense of belonging to the room that they could regard as their own. They felt at home in the pleasant and casual atmosphere of the learning lounge (the "known") which was in strong contrast with the alien setting of their previous classrooms that included a computer laboratory with high benches and stools (the "unknown").

(i) Physical place in the experience of on-line or e-learning
A critical literature review and empirical evaluation of on-line or e-learning provision in Australia (Wallace et al, 2003) held some strong messages for the importance of place-identity for the effectiveness of this kind of learning. The learners' constraints concerning their features of place-identity were shown to determine the quality of e-learning. For example, the spouse of a farmer has time, space, technological and interpersonal determinants on their e-learning, all or any of which impinge on the learning's occurrence, duration and intensity. Unless due attention is paid to these factors related to

the places of learning, which are 'known' to the learner but often not considered by the e-learning provider, then the success of the learning is imperilled in whole or in part.

Concluding comments

This paper has focused on place as a category of experience that influences identity and hence learning. While not in any way wishing to diminish the importance of the other two dimensions of identity in learning - self and group membership - as sources from which we derive the behaviours, beliefs, feelings and knowledges that constitute our identity resources, we believe that the significance of 'place' for effective learning in VET has been underestimated. The intent of this paper was to sensitise research direction and practice to giving appropriate attention to place–identity in learning. A synthesis of the literature of place-identity that included a framework identifying 'place' as one of three categories of experience from which identity resources are generated provided the lens to (re)interpret a diverse selection of VET related issues to illustrate the pertinence of place-identity in understanding and improving practice. In conclusion, the paper has set the ground for some concluding remarks about the importance of place-identity in effective learning.

For a start, the notion of place is often tied in with other furry concepts, such as 'community'. Communities of practice (e.g., Wenger 1998) are now a well-accepted notion that has been put into practice in the VET sector. Place-identity shows how people are connected to their communities of practice through their valuing of place, and how this attachment impacts on their learning. The challenge to VET educators is to incorporate the three dimensions of identity, including that of place, in their design of effective programs that capitalise on the unique pools of identity resources that learners bring with them and to provide the opportunities to transform or add to those pools to meet their learners' and their communities' needs.

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