

# **SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS IN LEARNING: WORKING ACROSS IDENTITY AND LEARNING BOUNDARIES**

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## **Abstract**

Learning engagement is informed by people's cultural and social experiences, relationships and identities. Developing innovative and successful approaches to training in remote and regional contexts with culturally and socially diverse people is underpinned by effective partnerships and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems as they relate to the worlds of work, community engagement and learning. A recent study examined the role of identity in engagement in formal education by socially disenfranchised learners from regional Northern Australia. Participants' identities informed their negotiation of, and decision making about, risk taking and decision making in education. They actively informed regional learners' identities about participation in formal education.

The study's outcomes described learner identities and the associated learning partnerships that inform engagement in learning and the ways they function as powerful mediators of learner experience and engagement. These *social partnerships in learning* are the connecting tissue between learning systems and agents and operate at and across all levels; i.e. involving individuals, organizations and learning systems. Social partnerships in learning frameworks are used to examine diverse knowledge systems, recognise a range of learning identities, develop capacity building processes and examine the underlying relationships that facilitate connections, engagement and decision making between government, non-government, enterprise, and community stakeholders and individuals. This paper discusses the key drivers in understanding learner identity, and the potential of social partnerships in learning frameworks to understand disenfranchised adults' learning engagement.

## **Introduction**

Post-compulsory providers (both universities and vocational education and training (VET) providers) have particular, well-established identities informed by past experiences, relationships and interpretations of their stakeholders' expectations. Long standing stakeholders of these providers also have established identities that match those of the providers. But what of those learners who have not historically seen themselves as part of formal adult education centres or communities? How do educational institutions connect with these disenfranchised learners? How do those learners respond to and potentially resolve the differences in identities about learning and workforce engagement between themselves and those of the established educational institutions? Addressing the disconnects between individuals, communities and educational institutions and their assumptions about engagement in learning activities involves understanding and being able to support the development of learner identities and relationships that inform and support engagement.

This research sought to develop an understanding of the ways identity resources are related to engagement in learning experiences by adults in regional communities who are disenfranchised from educational institutions. Social capital provides a framework to understand the resources that function and are drawn upon through social interactions. Learning and identity are understood as social practices connected to and informed by the ways individuals and local, workplace and global communities interact. These interactions, their nature and the informing frameworks are the central consideration of this study.

## **Significance**

Participation in education and training is considered vital for a flexible and responsive workforce (OECD 2001) in a Western society characterized by an emphasis on a learning society, a knowledge economy and life long learning (Kearns 1999, OECD 2000) yet with a strong connection between global connectedness and the well being of local and regional communities (Falk 2001, Hugonnier 1999). The OECD's examination of 21 OECD countries found a correlation between investment in human capital, including improving engagement in formal education and national productivity (Bassanini and Scarpetta 2002). The Australian Federal Government and Council of Australian Governments have identified the need to improve productivity

through increasing educational participation and outcomes in the tertiary sector (Gillard 2008). The Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon Julia Gillard MP has announced that in response to the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, the Australian Federal Government aims ‘that by 2025, 40 per cent of all 25-34 year olds will have a qualification at bachelor level or above’ and that ‘by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level should be of people from low socio-economic backgrounds’ (DEEWR 2009). Improving the enrolments and qualifications levels of adults involves understanding the underlying drivers of adults’ decision making about engagement in post compulsory education decision making.

Developing innovative and successful approaches to training in remote, regional and urban contexts with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people necessitates effective partnership and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems and identities as they relate to the worlds of work, community engagement and learning. In order to consider the reasons for this disenfranchisement and develop a framework to assess possible strategies to overcome it, it is necessary to develop learning profiles of adults with particular emphasis on understanding *the collective work of realising shared goal(s)* (Seddon and Billett 2004). Educational systems that work in partnerships with different knowledge systems and identities have the potential to re-imagine the VET in combination with workforce and regional community outcomes. The management of these ways of knowing and being related to learning is a challenge for educators and policy makers.

### **Literature Review**

Falk (2006 p.22) has described engagement as the essence of learning which is ‘situational formed and determined’. A social theory of learning which is based on the notion that people are social beings, that knowledge is generated and interpreted in relation to meaningful activities and enterprises that are valued by societal structures (Wenger 1998 p.4). Learning is ‘participation in a social learning is a social construct, in which both the learner and the practice are transformed’ Scott (2001 p.32). This practice is differentiated and stratified socially, impacting on the content, context and pedagogy of learning experiences. Smyth and Hattam (2005) argue school experiences that alienated young learners were related to the mismatches between

their developing identity as a person and the narrow identities schools expect. Lankshear and Knobel (2003 p.179) studied the disconnections between the cultural identities and experiences of teachers and students that made it difficult for teachers to connect learning to students' experiences, teach for diversity and lessen disadvantage. Pakoa (2006) supports these findings in a study of the impact of identity and socially based expectations on the educational experiences and outcomes of Melanesian post graduate students in Australia.

For Wenger (1998 p.155), identity in practice as a *negotiated experience*, where people are identified by their participation, or lack thereof, in a group, as *community membership*, where people understand what is familiar, or not, as a *learning trajectory*, defined in terms of historical influences. Wenger describes identity in terms of a nexus of membership and is defined by the reconciliation of different types of individuals' membership of different communities. These communities operate at a local and a global level. The tensions and decisions made about learning are based on identities, and identification with social agendas or communities, can impact on educational experiences, decisions about involvement in learning and definition as a learner. A range of different practices and contexts are utilised by learners while 'identity is used to describe the continuous and relatively fixed that underlies the contextually shifting multiple identities...situated identities are mutually constructed and are concerned with situated means, social languages, cultural models and Discourses. Discourses cover what has been described as communities of practice, cultural communities, distributed knowledge or distributed systems' (Gee 1999 p.38). Social partnerships in learning frameworks provide a model for understanding the gaps between a range of diverse knowledge systems as they relate to individuals, groups and institutions. Developing innovative and successful approaches to learning with disenfranchised learners necessitates effective partnership and approaches that recognise diverse knowledge systems and learner identities as they relate to the worlds of work, community engagement and learning. Social partnerships catalyse and enable change in human or social policy (EU Guideline Principles 2004). Social partnerships in learning, then, are the interagency and interdisciplinary relationships that enable effective learning in different disciplines, workplaces and training sites. Social partnerships in learning frameworks are used to; examine diverse knowledge systems, develop capacity building processes and understand the underlying relationships that facilitate connections, engagement and decision making between

government, non-government, enterprise, community, stakeholders and individuals (Wallace 2008:7).

## **Methodology**

The research project was conducted in a regional area of Northern Australia and explored the role of identities in learner engagement in education and training. The study focused on adults in a regional area who are proportionally underrepresented in adult education enrolments and included people from social groups historically disenfranchised from educational institutions?" Specifically the research sought to understand for regional learners:

The ways issues of identity relate to learning engagement

- Barriers and enablers related to identity that impact active engagement in formal education and training
- Constructs of identity that support active involvement in formal education and training
- The ways some adults develop the skills, knowledge and identity resources to effectively engage with and affect change educational institutions
- Issues that impact on learning and engagement in the workplace and community.

Data was gathered from three representative groups from the region, the participants have varying degrees of formal education engagement across their lives and may not have continued to complete secondary school or post compulsory education or training. Detailed portraits have been developed of fifteen adults' lifetime learning experiences. The portraits were constructed from interviews with participants about their experiences of learning, learning practices and their relationship to identity resources; both those that are brought to learning and their interpretation through involvement in formal and informal learning. The participants reflect the people who live and operate in the Northern Territory and include men and women are employed or unemployed in professional and manual work and live in a regional area of the Northern Territory. Participants originate from a range of cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous people, the sample size and construction reflects the demography of the region

The interview transcripts were used to develop a portrait (Smyth and Hattam 2004) that profiled each learner's trajectory through formal and informal engagement in

learning. The portraits were analysed through two specific lenses; identity informed by Wenger (1998) and Gee's (2003) identity principles and a social capital analytic framework based on the work of Woolcock (2001) to analyse the key features and resources of different learner identities drawn upon throughout people's learning experiences.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Purpose for learner engagement*

The ways that the purpose for study interacted with learners' identity had an impact on the kinds of identities that were enacted in the learning experience. When learners were participating to comply with an external requirement that is not reinforced by local and valued community memberships, learner identities focussed on surviving the difficult and conflicting situations they found themselves in. When the purpose was actively undermined by members of valued communities, particularly when that educational participation challenged the bonding ties, they had to resist what was happening in their community and school based identity. Where the purpose was endorsed or could be explained satisfactorily in the community networks, empowered identities were evident and provided a support base to negotiate the identity challenges along the way. People explained why their involvement would benefit their role in their communities, a role that would be supported and approved in that community, family or other affiliation. For example, wanting to study to be a teacher in the local school and teach local children's about concepts and using pedagogy of importance to that community, from an insider's view. It also meant that a network of support understood the learning engagement and were prepared to help reinterpret it to support participation.

### *Networks accessed and supported through engagement*

Participants' sense of self as a learner, their learner identity as defined by themselves and others, i.e. their networks was described in relation to their engagement in learning. Learners described their identity in terms of their informing networks, their experiences and self efficacy. Learners' identity resources drew on a range of strategies and networks informed by their relationships and community identities, including those that act in opposition to institutional identities. Learners talked about how they maintained their identity while studying and the strategies they employed.

For example, studying off site so there was no need to be physically on campus or identifying a local mentor to support an individual's study programme.

When faced with the choice of succeeding by conforming to the educational institution in opposition to their own community affiliations, some people chose to remain a member of their existing communities at the expense of engagement. For them, the bonding ties were strong and reinforced while the bridging ties weak. The resources they drew on, the language to describe their conflict, the networks to help inform that change or understand the processes with learning identities and their relationships with a range of institutional and community identities. They have persisted, resisted or manage the conflicts within learner identities until the stress of managing an aligned identity membership was greater than the need for the achieving the goal.

#### *Types of learner identity evident through engagement*

Learners had, at some stage, persisted until the stress of managing the alignment of their identity membership was greater than the need for the achieving the educational goal. Learners actively made the choice to withdraw from formal learning as the risk to their identity was too great and the potential reward too small. Persistent learners are described as learners who persist in their learner engagement, trying to balance their identity in terms of membership in a range of communities until it was too difficult, unviable or challenges their sense of self. Persistent learners described many attempts to express their difficulties and make an impact on the ways Learners who had participated in learning by resisting the educational institution's impact on its identity, by getting involved to the point where their own identities were challenged were described as resistant learners. These learners participated until the risk of their involvement in education was greater than the risk of leaving education.

Empowered learners could manage the associated risk taking and resolve the difficulties that had previously presented through their learning engagement, in a way that enabled their further engagement. In this way they had developed the capacity to manage their learner and other identities. Of course this is a gross overgeneralisation, many people talked about the ways they worked to respond to and make change in their experiences in education. The keys for making transition from one sort of

identity to another, this was related to their identification with the education system or experience.

#### *Resources used and demonstrated through engagement*

Participants' sense of self as a learner, their learner identity as defined by themselves and others, i.e. their informing networks was described in relation to their engagement in learning. Learners described their identity in terms of their informing networks, their experiences and self efficacy. Those who had rejected formal education utilised self talk focussed on confirming their membership of their existing communities despite challenges from institutional processes and in opposition to that of the educational institution. Learners', who had achieved their educational goals, self talk that focussed on having a strong sense of themselves as empowered learners as active agents in the formal system, they had tried many different ways of challenging and participating, as students, as parents, as community members but had found to maintain their identity, they had chosen to withdraw. Learners who had actively participated and negotiated their involvement used self talk about why they should be studying and how to rationalise that involvement despite what others might say. It is not enough to be able to talk about an idea, as Gee (2004, 2007) has noted, verbal understanding of words 'implies an ability to explicate one's understanding in terms of other words or general principles, but not necessarily an ability to apply this knowledge to actual situations while situated understanding implies being able to understand a word or concepts in relation to a specific context or situation' (Gee 2007:113).

#### *Degree of student centred negotiability and learner empowerment*

Learners who were empowered, able to sustain their engagement in learning through challenges to their learning experiences and how the learner identities on which they drew helped to address those challenges. For many learners the successful resolution of the contradictions between local, peer, workplace and educational institutional communities informing identities was related strongly to a belief that they should have a role in education system (this did not mean being compliant, participants described their role was to master, maintain their own integrity as a learner and community member and, for most, challenging the existing paradigm). This attitude tended to be more important in being successful than the strategy used. Supporting



students' identity and participation are more than teaching a range of strategies; it was about resolving the nexus of membership that includes educational institutional community membership. The learners, who had managed to continue engagement for a part of their programme, described their learner identity as it related to the institution and their own community. They had been able to negotiate strategies that worked for them to actively participate. This was optimised when students were able to make strong connections to their own purpose and understandings of the world.

The learning identities were described in terms of the participants' reasoning around their learning engagement, the strategies utilised to manage challenges and the demonstrations of participants' sense of agency as a learner was analysed and has been grouped to describe four descriptions of learner identity. The analysis grouped the different learner identities enacted over time as;

- *Persistence*; engagement in learning experiences is characterised by trying to adapt to and respond to the discontinuous institutional, community and individually based social processes and identities and trying to mirror the dominant identities sufficiently to complete a qualification or master a skill set,
- *Resistance*; engagement in learning experiences is characterised by resisting the transformative effects of learning and maintaining the integrity of the individual's existing learner identity in relation to the discontinuous institutional, community and individually based social processes and identities,
- *Transition*: engagement in learning experiences is characterised by moving between and experimenting with different learner identities over a short term in a nonlinear order without settling in one identity. .
- *Enacted*: engagement in learning experiences is characterised by negotiating the discontinuous institutional, community and individually based social processes and identities actively managing the intersections between the inherent social values and processes.

One learner identity is not preferred over another, they are enacted in different contexts and for different purposes as the learner deems appropriate. That is, when the learner assesses the risks of engagement in learning situations and their membership

in a range of communities for their identity as a learner and a member of their various communities.

## **Conclusion**

This study found many disenfranchised regional learners' identities are constructed in opposition to those of educational institutions as educational institutions have presented themselves in ways that act to threaten the identities of many regional learners. The ability of educators to manage the impact of any disparity between those students' realities and assumptions of educational institutions and curriculum influences students' potential engagement in learning. Importantly, people's identity or knowledge, their view of themselves, and the way they are identified by others, determines the ways they interact with educational institutions. In this paper the implications of these findings are discussed and a series of recommendations are made for pedagogy, policy and practice that will support regional learners and providers.

In conclusion, the data suggests that the learner identities of disenfranchised regional learners impacted on their ongoing engagement in formal education, and had more impact than the long term health and economic advantages. These learner identities are described in terms of transition, resistance, persistence and enacted. The decisions of disenfranchised regional learners to reject formal education are linked to the gap between their identification as a member of a complex web of valued global and local communities. The connections between different identities and their informing knowledge systems and communities are often unseen, complex and unrecognised. The implications for educational institutions to ensure they represent and include learners' identities as well as the opportunity to connect to other identities and knowledges. This learner identity 'work' for learners and institutions alike is conflicted, discontinuous, and can operate without the overt knowledge of the participants. Investment in learner identity negotiation partnerships across the lifespan and lifeworlds, is about understanding the nature of the connections made and mediated through the intersection of identity and learning. Social partnerships in learning may provide a framework for understanding the ways people and institutions manage conflict, difference and complexity to achieve their own goals.

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