THE ENACTED LEARNER IDENTITIES FRAMEWORK: THE POTENTIAL TO IMPROVE VET DELIVERY

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Abstract

Learning is a social process, informed by social interactions that are informed by place, time, language, culture and context. Learner identities are socially informed and connected to learners' communities based in school, peer, family, local and global contexts. Learner identity has been shown to have an impact on the ways disenfranchised learners engage with formal education. A recent study identified and typified participant learner identities in order to provide a framework for describing learner identities by adapting educational institutions and experiences to support the development of empowered learner identities. The four broad groupings of learner identity are described as resistant, persistent, transitional and enacted. This paper reports on this research and the potential of the learner identity framework to evaluate and refine learning approaches. Finally, the paper discusses each learner profile identified in the study to understand and respond to the decisions of learners around engagement and disengagement and suggests the implications for educational policy

Introduction

This paper reports on a study that examines the key drivers of disenfranchised learners' identities and the role of learning partnerships in both developing a learner identity that engages with post compulsory learning, and re-engaging regional learners. The research found that peoples' identities related to learning, that is, their learning identities, formed a core part of the adults' decision making across a range of educational experiences, institutions and purposes over their lives. An analysis of the participants' portraits examines the learner identities described by participants and provides a framework for describing learner identities and adapting educational institutions and experiences to support the development of empowered learner identities. The disparity between individuals' learner identity and those operating in learning situations impacted significantly on the resources and models that learners accessed to maintain their learner identity and mediate their engagement in formal education.

The research explores the ways that many disenfranchised regional learners' identities are constructed in opposition to those of educational institutions. The findings show that disenfranchised learners the way educational institutions have presented themselves and that act to threaten the identities, and therefore the engagement, of many regional learners. Learner identities were connected to learners' communities: school, peer, family, local information networks and global information networks. Individuals' strategies and resources to manage the intersection of these identities were also analysed in order to develop a learner

identity framework. The framework describes the different learner identities that individuals draw on and provides a means for understanding the underlying processes and resources

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 2001). 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).

Addressing the inequities in educational outcomes, impacts on individuals', communities and nations' employment and wellbeing and is underpinned by understanding the drivers that inform adults' decision making about engagement in formal education. Improving the enrolments and qualifications levels of adults involves understanding a) the underlying drivers of adults' decision making about engagement in post compulsory education decision making, b). the groups in Australian society who have the potential to significantly increase their participation and c) the pathways through VET to undergraduate qualifications. Such groups include regional and Australian Indigenous learners who have disengaged from formal education and are under represented in higher level qualifications.

Literature review

An understanding of the nature of learning and its development as a social process is central in understanding the connections between the ways disenfranchised learners make decisions about engagement in formal learning. Formal learning relates to that which is recognised and assessed through a formal institution and qualifications. This study also recognise the value of non-formal learning which relates to education that occurs through organisations whose main purpose is non-educational, and informal learning that relates to the learning that occurs through daily life and work rather than specific instruction (Colletta 1996, Hamadache 1993 Field 2005). Learning transcends classrooms and workplaces, it is a 'continuous, cultural process – not simply a series of events… organizational learning is as much about what happens *outside* formal learning programs as it is about the programs themselves' (Rosenburg 2001). This analysis of the social processes of learning recognises the socially mediated

nature of identity, knowledge and resources as they intersect with educational engagement.

Learning is the 'active process by which we engage with our changing environment and try to take control of our lives' (Field 2005:3). Gee (2003:26) notes that learning is involved with understanding how to 'situate (build) meanings for that domain in the sorts of situations the domain involves'. Wenger (1998) describes learning as social and experienced, as part of social contexts where people utilise their relationships to engage in meaningful experiences where they negotiate their shared understandings of the world.

Gee (2004) asserts that people learn better through embodied processes, where content is related to activities, discussion and sharing ideas. Embodied knowledge is embedded in educational systems' elements and interactions (Sharples, Taylor and Vavoula 2007). Through these interactions and the experiences related to specific contexts, people learn and become partners in creating ways of understanding those elements in that context. The interactions related to learning create connections that are mediated through communities of common interest and that may be connected through m-learning processes across regional, social and workplace boundaries, just to name a few. Gee (2003) describes the communities of learners as affinity groups that form around a common endeavour first and, second, around sociocultural connections. Their knowledge is holistic rather than separated into specific narrow disciplines and intensive and deep about matters of importance to the community.

Learning is also a lifelong process that people engage in or disengage fro for a range of reasons Field (2005 p.99) groups people's attitudes to lifelong learning engagement (or disengagement) into three broad clusters;

- those who are sceptical about education's potential for achieving social change,

- those who participate but reject some kinds of participation to avoid indecision,

- those who actively engage in lifelong learning as part of personal development and community participation.

What of interest then is to understand how people make the decision to reflect these different types of engagement in formal learning. Bandura (1977) found that an individual's beliefs about their efficacy influence engagement, effort, persistence and choice. In terms of education, this means 'students with a high sense of efficacy are more likely to participate readily, work hard, and persist in the face of difficulties, success then led to building. Zimmerman (1995, 2000) and Bandura (1977, 1982) noted success builds belief in one's ability and modelling by observing similar people succeed impacts on self efficacy, the greater the similarity the more convincing, the corollary is that observing unsuccessful engagement reinforces a poor sense of self efficacy.

A social understanding of learning recognises these individual perspectives, and those related to individuals' connections to community and institutional structures. Responding to the complex nature of learning as a social and mediated practice requires educational processes that recognise and manage that complexity. To improve disenfranchised learners' engagement, educational

processes need to recognise the interplay of stakeholders' identities, the institutional or context specific nature of learning and the power relationships that are often hidden or accepted across a number of levels of policy pedagogy, curriculum, knowledges, communities and institutions. This does not necessarily involve overly complex processes but does imply practitioners need to understand the underpinning theory before using and adapting the relevant processes.

Understanding the contexts in which learners operate, the role and implications of learning practices means understanding the role of identity in learning. Falk and Balatti (2003) have found that a link exists between education and identity - that learners are affected by the ways they understand themselves and understand their identity as a learner in relation to both formal and informal education. They describe the dimensions of identity as the processes applied to experience (the interactive elements of forming, reforming and co-constructions that happen through learning), the categories of experience for identity in learning (the identities that are created through the individual, community and place) and the identity resources produced from the processing experience (the behaviours, beliefs, feelings and knowledges that are accessed through interactions).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) pose a theory of social identity through an understanding of group membership and discrimination. They discuss social identity in terms of; categorisation, the socially defined categories that are used to label groups (such as gender, ethnicity, activity, religion), identification where individuals assign membership of a group, comparison with other groups to affirm existing membership and psychological distinctiveness from and in terms of other groups. Crenshaw (2003) explores identities as socially constructed, with particular reference to socially constructed notions of gender and race and their impact on identities, Crenshaw's research is part of a large body of work by socially disenfranchised researchers to examine social processes through an analysis of gender, sexuality and ethnicity in identity. Tajfel (1974) describes identity in terms of social and psychological understandings of group behaviour and the impact of group membership on interactions between individuals. He asserts that behaviour is informed by the relationships between their identity as an individual and as part of a community. A personal identity relates to an individual's characteristics and relationships, and their social identity, i.e. their acceptance or rejection of membership of a group. Based on the social context, an individual makes decisions about which of this repertoire of identities, from the interpersonal to the intergroup, to draw on and in what combination.

For Gee (2000-1 p.100) identity is defined in four ways: (a) in terms of the genetic make up of individual, (b) the institutional identity defined in terms of an individual's relationship to authority, (c) the discursive identity which functions in relation to being recognized by discourse or language use and (d) affinity-identity or identifying as a part of group with similar interests or experiences and share certain practices. There are connections and tensions between these types of identity as we define ourselves through belonging to a range of local Discourses that are also located in our global understandings of the world. Côté and Levine (2002) explore the multidimensionality of identity, where individuals synthesise their psychological, personal, and social identities in order to make sense of their

own identity internally and externally, i.e. to the broader society. The resolution of these identities is then connected to success in interacting with social structures and processes.

Research method

The research utilised a critical approach to social research that draws on a series of complementary social research theoretical frameworks and techniques. Critical ethnography (Thomas 1993) uses knowledge to speak to an audience on behalf of the subjects as a means of empowering them rather than speaking for the subjects. To ensure this research study spoke on behalf of participants accurately, the data collection techniques involved interviewing socially diverse and disenfranchised participants. The structure of the interviews was flexible and encouraged and valued diversity and views that challenged the researchers' preconceptions, social institutions and theories. That is, in accordance with the tenets of the critical narrative inquiry approach (Cortazzi 1993), the methodology utilised techniques designed to best capture the richness and depth of disenfranchised learners' relevant experiences. The research approach was therefore designed to examine and understand frameworks that focus on the situated, constructed and negotiated nature of meaning in the social order.

The sample group of 20 people was identified from three representative groups from a Northern Australian regional area. The participants have varying degrees of formal education engagement across their lives and engagement in post compulsory education or training. The groups were identified according to the following criteria where learning goals may include qualifications, skills sets, recognition of knowledge, personal or professional development and defined as follows:

- Group A are non participators in post compulsory education and describe themselves as not achieving their learning goals through engagement in formal education.

- Group B are participators in post compulsory education and describe themselves as not achieving their learning goals through engagement in formal education.

- Group C are participators in post compulsory education and describe themselves as achieving their learning goals through engagement in formal education.

The in-depth interviews were used to examine the complexities of participants' engagement in social constructions of knowledge, learning and identity and associated processes. The techniques allowed for the inclusion of a critical perspective that could make visible the taken-for-granted and invisible but influential, social processes and institutions. The research design assumed that the examination of cultural and social perspectives requires in-depth analysis of behaviour, perceptions and experiences.

The research process followed these interrelated stages, each of which provided opportunities for the researcher and participant to reflect on each stage while refining and undertaking the next.
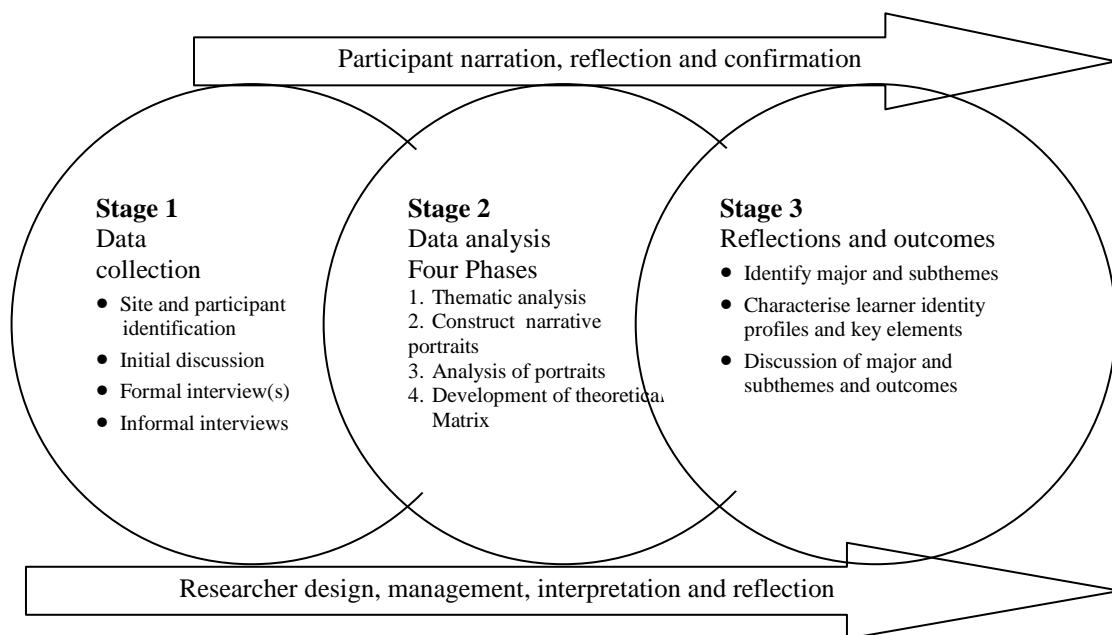
Figure 1 Research design framework

Findings and Discussion

Each concept was analysed in terms of the types of responses evident in the data, the activities that people engaged in, their interpretations of those events, their related decisions and the roles enacted. The findings identified the key themes or elements in people's decision making about learner engagement. These were connected to the learners' social identity; that is their view of themselves, their connections to others within specific contexts. Learners' identities were mutable, shifting in no prescribed order where multiple identities were functioning simultaneously, in relation to different contexts or situations. One learner identity was not preferred over another; they can be appropriate or counterproductive in different contexts and for different purposes.

The participants' reasoning around their learning engagement, the strategies utilised to manage challenges and the demonstrations of participants' sense of agency as a learner were analysed and grouped to describe four descriptions of learner identity. Each learner identity was examined in terms of
- purpose for learner engagement,
- networks accessed and supported through engagement,
- types of learner identity evident through engagement,
- resources used and demonstrated through engagement
- degree of student centred negotiability and learner empowerment,
- alignment of learners' identities with informing identities i.e. professional, institutional, global and community

The learner identities were found to grouped as follows;
- *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 (reported previously in Wallace 2009).

This has be summarised in Figure 2

	Purpose	Network - Bonding Ties	Network- Bridging Ties	Network- Linking Ties	Identity resources	Processes	Alignment of identities	Sense of agency/efficacy	Access to information and resources
Persistence									
Resistance									
Transition									
Balanced									
Other									

Figure 2 Enacted learner identity framework

While there is not space to examine every element here, this discussion will outline some of the key features of learner identities that informed the development of the learner identity framework. Quotes from the participants' interviews are used to exemplify these points. While participants were drawn from three different groups, representing different types of engagement and outcomes, they all described the significant challenges their identity as a learner made to their learning engagement. The learner identity they drew on and the associated resources, purpose, networks and vision of their own efficacy was different. The impact of those learner identities was the factor that made the difference in their engagement in learning identity.

Learners described their decisions and informing networks in terms of their relationship to different learning identities. The communities or networks that informed participants' identities included their different worlds; family, local, institution, workplace and global communities. Learners' identities transition, in no prescribed order, between: resistant learner identities, avoiding externally imposed change to their learner identity at all costs; persistent identities that survive external challenges to learner identity by minimising their impact on the core identity and empowered identities, maintaining the integrity of an individual's identity while exploring other learner identities and experiences.

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 were weak. The resources they drew on were? 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.

In answer to the question about how to help learners move to a learner identity that supports engagement, the essential and common features of learners who had common backgrounds with those who had not participated and achieved their goals were identified. The learners with enacted learner identities described the strategies and learning features that supported their ongoing engagement in learning and ultimate success, as they defined success.

Learners had variously persisted, resisted or managed the conflicts within learner identities until the stress of managing their learner identity was more stressful than it was worth to achieve the learners' goal. For example, Peta noted that

> it took 3 goes at different institutions to complete my degree. In the end I had to focus on finishing through compliance rather than learning and questioning in order to achieve the goal of becoming a teacher and changing other students' experiences of education.

Learners, who were empowered and had an enacted learner identity, were able to sustain their engagement in learning, through various challenges, by drawing on their learner identities to help them to address those challenges.

For many learners the successful resolution of the contradictions between how local, peer, workplace and educational institutional communities informed their identities was related strongly to a belief that they should have a role in the education system. This did not mean being compliant. Participants with an enacted learner identity described their role as to master, maintain their own integrity as a learner and community member and, for most, challenge the existing paradigm.

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. For example, as Rhonda said,

> I've noticed the ones [the ones asking] more questions and are prepared to put forward their views are the older people, not the younger people, the people with experience in life, who've had the hard knocks and had to try and get over them. Because if I don't understand something I'll say, 'Hm, sorry, don't understand. I've learnt now that I really don't care if you're going to make me feel bad because I don't understand, 'cause I just want to understand it. So I've learnt to say to myself, 'I don't care what you think, I want to understand… (the content) I'm going to ask you the question 10 times and you can shake your head as much as you like but I really need to know the answer and I really need to understand

Learners described their identity in terms of their informing networks, their experiences and self efficacy. Those who had rejected formal education utilised self talk focused on confirming their membership of their existing communities despite challenges from institutional processes and in opposition to that of the educational institution. For Michael, participating in formal education was a challenge to his established ways of understanding the world, it made him ask

> Who am I? How do I reconcile who I am with who I was before? Our extended family groups have a certain set of mores and things they know and the way they understand the world.

These were conflicts that impacted on his engagement in higher education. Participants with an enacted learner identity described their role as to master, maintain their own integrity as a learner and community member and, for most, challenge the existing paradigm. Rhonda described the need to manage their own learner identity despite considerable challenges from the educational institution about their enrolment

> I was devastated and I was crying, 'God, I've had enough of this.' That lasted 10 minutes and I talked myself around and said, 'You are made of sterner stuff than that. '

This attitude tended to be more important in being successful than the strategy used. Supporting students' identity and participation is more than teaching a range of strategies; it is about recognising the importance of resolving the nexus of membership (of different identities see Wenger 1998) that includes educational institutional community membership. Michael noted

> I suffered a lot at the hands of my supervisors because I looked different to the other(s)…when I did external studies, I took great pains not to let anyone know what I looked like because I wanted them to judge me on what the output of my brain was.

The keys for making transition from one sort of identity to another were related to identification with the purpose of the education system or experience and approval for engagement. One of the core sources was their family or home community, Karen, one of the participants, noted:

> My father always said you can do anything you want to do. I had a very traditional mother who was home all the time…my mother didn't study, so they had a very traditional household and he always said, 'If you want to study I will back you to the hilt' and I always did.

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.

When learner engagement events were closely aligned to their current learner identity, learners were able to manage challenges and maintain the equilibrium of their learner identity. This was because the experience reflected the consistency of their networks. When the learner event challenged the learner's current

learner identity and its informing frameworks, they experienced discomfort and referred to their learner identities for support. After leaving school as early as possible, Gina worked through a number of jobs around her area of interest. One thing that made an impact was

> working with a phenomenal curator [who] had such a passion for natural history. [He] was a professional entomologist and pushed me really hard in several areas of taxonomy, proper scientific writing and just so much fun to work with. I suppose working with lots of academics around technical support was great. It really inspired me to be like them… it's like an apprenticeship.

This alignment of membership was complex and difficult, but it was managed by some learners so that they could face challenges and complexity and take risks. The task of developing, maintaining and enhancing learner identity was an ongoing project which was redefined and challenged by new or different experiences. These participants could articulate their own relationship to other identities and act on it. The following comment exemplifies this ability.In this context, the participant had felt unsafe and stupid school education and had been accepted in workplace learning environment with experts sharing knowledge and skills.

> I felt really valued, I felt safe, compared to being blasted from the mount. Many of my mentors challenged me. That really pushed me, probably what I needed at that stage. They were so willing to share about their chosen career. That rubs off on you. I am getting more confidence to try these strategies that are working in the classroom (Gina).

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. Rhonda noted that she

> Wouldn't let the bastards meet me, because I started it and I wanted it. You only get places in the world if you try and better yourself, be it in any way, shape or form, physically, mentally, emotionally. You are only going to grow if you keep trying to better yourself.

Learner Identity and Engagement

Successful learners had worked out how to negotiate their learning identity and were prepared to manage the associated challenges. Learners who hadn't achieved their learning goals had resolved conflicts by leaving the educational institution. As Scott (2001:39) found 'adopting a particular way of working, a particular understanding of knowledge the learner is rejecting or turning aside from other frameworks and this itself is an act of power'. Identity is being continuously renegotiated through participants' interpretation of themselves in terms of learning events and contexts and their membership of relevant communities. This practice involves negotiating diverse ways of engaging in practice that reflects the participants' individuality, accountability to significant communities, and performance elements that are recognised or not as valid by the relevant communities.

Learner identities are a work in progress; they change and develop through social interaction, relationships and experience. Learners need the opportunity

explore other identities and the associated knowledge systems, their content, contexts and insider perspectives. Learners with empowered identities may not necessarily be confident of their position in relation to formal education but know they have the resources and sense of self efficacy as a learner to manage challenges as they occur. They can undertake the complex tasks involved in balancing their learner identity membership of their informing communities. Learners' activities that supported learners helped to build their learner identity resources and sense of efficacy. This could be achieved through a range of strategies that focus around the co-production of knowledge where there are low penalties for non-conformity and co-production is valued. These might include;

- Making the underlying social structures and knowledge processes of formal educational institutions explicit and connecting people to those structures and processes.
- Providing opportunities to experiment with a range of identities and reflect on what this might mean for their existing identities. This involves the provision of opportunities to explore new contexts using their own content.

- Co-productiion of knowledge that accesses the existing knowledge and links to other forms of knowledge through the co-creation of a new way of understanding a content or context.
- Normalising empowered identities in difficult situations. An example is establishing a mentoring group for learners undertaking traineeships in mainstream organisations where they can talk about their experiences and reflect on why they happen and how to manage them with senior successful disenfranchised mentors. Importantly learners must have the opportunity to examine the reasons that institutional discrimination occurs and what that means for them and their identity
- Implementing approaches to training that start by recognising the learners strengths and skills as the starting and reference point for learning
- Providing learning experiences that support people to practise and articulate an explanation of that risk-taking/engagement to a range of audience, including themselves and allowing the opportunity to explore knowledge systems as active participants who can interact.

Conclusions

The study found that the ability to develop and maintain a strong learner identity repeatedly over a lifetime had a direct impact on learning engagement. Therefore, understanding the complex and multifaceted relationships that are engaged in developing and maintaining an enacted learner identity would benefit learners, teachers and learning partners.

The central elements related to a sense of efficacy as a learner, being able to articulate their own identity as a learner to a range of audiences and being able to align the different community, family, professional and global identities and the associated purposes that impact on that individual and their connection to the world. However, the identity of learning institutions may not align with those of disenfranchised learners. 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. Educational activities and institutional approaches, then, that incorporate the development of these skills and attitudes can support the ongoing engagement of a range of learners.

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