Identity formation in effective vocational education and training programs

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Introduction

Over recent years there has been considerable discussion about the importance of 'employability skills' or 'generic skills' in vocational education and training. Considerable effort has been made to try and define what is meant by these terms and to measure them so that they can form part of the assessable criteria of units in training packages and qualifications.

Emerging from the findings of the author's PhD, which explores the role of VET as a capacity building tool in northern Australian contexts, this paper proposes that many of these 'skills'—such as self-esteem, self-confidence, motivation and awareness—are more closely aligned to a training participant's identity and as such are not assessable in the same way as skills defined under performance criteria. The paper firstly explores the basis for this position. It draws on literature to define what 'identity formation' means and demonstrates the links between identity and learning. Based on research findings it suggests a model, which shows how emerging identities are formed in effective training programs.

Research methods

The research methodology for the PhD project is based on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2000) with a mixed method design (Creswell 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998). The project involved two stages: the first largely quantitative; the second largely qualitative. Both however had deductive and inductive analysis strategies built in. The results presented in this paper represent one part of the findings of the broader PhD research project. They are drawn primarily from stage two of the project.

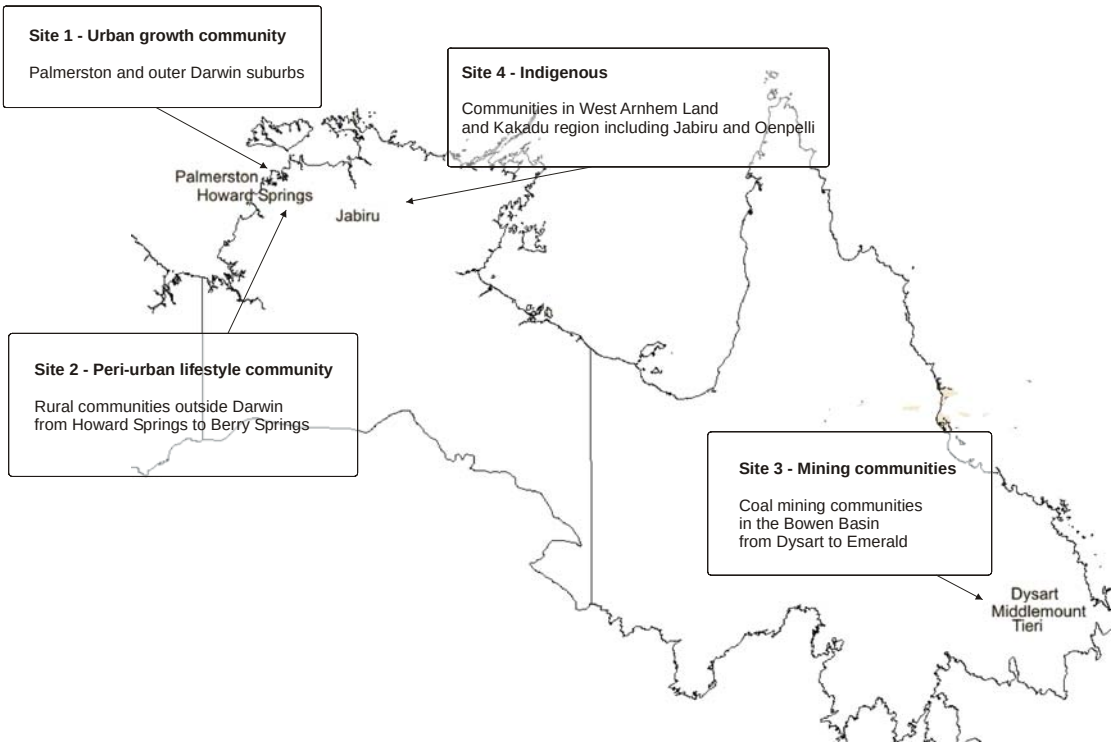
Stage one of the research relied on a variety of existing census and survey data to firstly determine the variability of well-being across the savanna region and secondly to build a typology that could be used for site selection in a series of case studies. This was done by first identifying a number of well-being indicators that conformed to a broad OECD/ABS based framework of social indicators (ABS 2001; OECD 1982, 2003). Data sources were examined and applied to this framework for communities and subregions of the savanna. The data was analysed using statistical methods. These included use of summary descriptive statistics such as totals and averages and also correlation analysis to determine the relationships that existed between variables. The end result of stage one was the development of a typology of savanna communities and a detailed analysis of locational statistics that illustrated the level of well-being and the qualitative nature of that well-being.

The starting point for stage two of the research was the typology developed in stage one. Four regions representing four types of communities were selected for case studies: mining communities, Indigenous communities, urban growth communities and peri-urban lifestyle communities. Three sites in the Northern Territory were

chosen and one in Queensland. Stakeholders were identified in stage two using 'purposeful' sampling strategies (Bernard 2000:176; Creswell 1998:62). In particular, a version of a 'snowball technique' (Patton 2002:237) was used so that stakeholders and respondents ultimately referred themselves to each other. Four groups of learning stakeholders were identified as potential interviewees: VET providers; community organisation representatives, government representatives and industry representatives. A total of 102 interviews were conducted with 132 respondents.

Consistent with the qualitative nature of the second stage of the project—from which the findings presented here are drawn—case studies were used to elicit responses from education and training stakeholders from sites defined by the four community types identified in the first stage. Figure 1 maps the case study sites used for this research, and also shows the extent of the tropical savanna region. The research design allowed for a multi layered (Patton 2002: 447), multi-site approach enabling exploration of more generalisable principles and adequate external validity (Merriam 1998:40; Stake 2000:437) so that findings could be applied to other Australian regional contexts if needed.

Figure 1. Case study sites used in this research (map adapted from TS-CRC 2005)



A semi-structured interview instrument was selected as the most appropriate means for the theory building aims of the second stage (Fontana and Frey 2000; Wengraf 2001). The transcribed text files were used in qualitative research software Nudist™, which was then used for coding and thematic analysis. Having identified a number of themes arising out of the text, a database of outcomes and processes was developed using an Access™ relational database. This database was then used to link to an Excel™ spreadsheet for more detailed analysis of the quantized data. In particular the spreadsheet allowed for a comparison of stakeholder types and sites, and convenient graphical presentation of the data.

The interviews conducted with VET stakeholders elicited responses about the benefits of learning and examples of programs that respondents felt were 'effective'. Identity

formation benefits emerged strongly as a key factor that contributed to, and described, the effectiveness of programs. This paper focuses primarily on this one aspect of the PhD project.

Literature on identity and learning

Given the emerging findings about *identity formation*, it was necessary to turn to the literature to firstly understand what is meant by the term, and secondly to understand the connection between learning and identity. This section examines these two issues.

What is identity?

In the psychology literature there has been a rapidly growing body of work concerning self and identity. Ashmore and Jussim (1997) suggest that in the previous four decades the breadth of research had expanded in the order of ten-fold and the volume of works published on the topic had more than doubled in the two decades to 1993. The topics covered under the subject heading of self and identity include: self-concept, self-evaluation, self-perception, self-esteem, self-reinforcement, self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-narrative and self-report among many others. While recognising that philosophically there is more than one way of answering the question: "what is identity?". In effect the answer to the question can be determined by an individual's self-consciousness (Garrett 1998:4-5).

Identity can be also though of in terms of personal or collective: as 'individual level phenomena' or 'societal-level phenomena' (Ashmore & Jussim 1997:5). Among the terms they associated with the societal-level aspects of identity are: cultural conception of person; cultural conception of self/identity, cultural arrangements that constrain personhood and self of individuals; and selves of individuals in a particular culture (p. 6). While it is not the intention here to fully unpack these terms summarised neatly by Ashmore and Jussim, phrases such as: 'corporate identity'; 'national identity', 'occupational identity', and 'community identity' are encompassed under these societal level phenomena.

Identity—individual or collective—involves who we are and who we think we are: knowledge and perception (Purdie *et al* 2000). It is also interactive. It is influenced by interactions with other individuals and other collectives; that is, we define ourselves on the basis of our perceptions and interactions between peers, parents and others. The question of 'who am I?' presupposes norms, values and traits, which mean that the question cannot be answered simplistically (Jopling 2000). Elliott (2001), commenting on a sociological view of self formation in relation to the impact of relationships with people, cultural norms and forms states:

> Particularly for sociologists interested in the dynamics of interpersonal interaction, the self can be thought of as a central mechanism through which the individual and the social world intersect. (p. 24)

Based on the foregoing discussion, the definition of identity used in this research can be summarised as *that which defines the individual (or collective), expressed through perceptions of self-concept that include self-esteem and self-confidence and which is influenced by the social interactions, relationships and the norms and values in which the individual is situated*.

Links between identity formation and learning

The outcomes and outputs of education and learning are infrequently described as 'successful' in terms of identity formation. Traditionally, successful learning has been related to outcomes such as employment, skills competence, academic achievement, satisfaction with training, work performance and completions. While these are of some importance they largely ignore the influence learning has on personal and social identity. Clemans *et al* (2003) identify a number of Adult and Community Education (ACE) outcomes, under the heading of 'learning to be' and 'growth in wellbeing and self-awareness'. These include aspects of self-concept related to personal, public and work domains.

Falk and Balatti (2003) in a broad analysis of international literature propose a framework for articulating identity in learning. They describe three dimensions of identity in learning that work interdependently to both draw on and build on each other: processes (interacting and 'storying'), categories of experience (individuals, groups and place) and identity resources (behaviours, beliefs, feelings, knowledge). The latter is related to identity resource elements of social capital (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000). The relationship between VET and social capital is frequently discussed in literature, often in terms of VET's contribution to building social capital. Kearns (2004:13) for example cites eight different ways that VET contributes to social capital but fails to make a connection between the processes of identity formation that occur during training as a reason for building social capital.

Aspects of identity formation such as self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation are frequently reported in research as personal outcomes of participation in VET (Dawe 2004; Dumbrell 2000) and are often described under the umbrella of generic skills (Gibb & Curtin 2004), soft skills (SEWRSEBC 2000:31) or employability skills (ACCI/BCA 2002; DET 2004). There have been attempts made to quantify these 'skills' so that they form part of the assessment of training package units like standard competencies, which form the basis of assessment of most units (Down 2004). However, as Curtis (2004:148) acknowledges: 'Some of the elements of generic skills more difficult to measure include personal and interpersonal skills'. The problem appears to be that aspects of identity formation, which are difficult to assess, are lumped together with generic skills which are more readily measurable and assessable. Clayton *et al* (2004:160) for example list a range of generic skills. They place personal values, self esteem, punctuality, meeting deadlines and telephone skills together in the same group without acknowledging the differences in these 'skills'.

'Generic skills' are a recognised outcome of VET. However, there is little information in the literature that suggests how important these generic skills are relative to other aspects of the learning process. While improved self-confidence and self-esteem are often cited as by-products of learning, questions remain about the role of learning in identity formation. For example, how significant is identity formation in the learning process, relative to other products of training. While there are suggestions that identity formation may be significant for individuals—student outcomes surveys for example show the importance of personal development—there is little indication that for other stakeholders, identity formation 'outcomes' are treated as a priority. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that programs are designed with identity formation outcomes or processes in mind.

Research findings and discussion

This section describes and discusses key findings from the author's PhD research that relate specifically to identity formation. The findings emerged from analysis of 102 semi-structured interviews designed to elicit responses about the benefits of learning and examples of what respondents perceived to be 'effective training programs'. Firstly, the section summarises how respondents expressed identity formation in learning. Second, the findings are discussed in terms of a proposed model of identity formation.

How is identity formation expressed?

Based on the definitions of identity offered in the literature review, analysis of respondent interviews showed that almost one quarter of all benefits from engagement with learning could be described as 'identity benefits'. The other main benefits identified in the research—not discussed in this paper—include employment, educational, income and social benefits. A much smaller proportion of responses identified health, culture and leisure, environmental and personal safety benefits.

While it has been acknowledged in the literature that identity can be individual or collective in nature, respondents universally discussed identity benefits accruing from training as applying to the individual, not the collective. However, consistent with the literature, respondents did describe individuals' identity formation in terms of their relationships with others. It is important to note that respondents did not use the word 'identity' to define these benefits. Instead, they used words associated with the concept, which have been described in the literature review.

Four main groupings or clusters of data emerge in relation to identity formation benefits. The first group relates to the development of the self-concept; the second to self efficacy or personal capacity; the third to social relationships and the last group relates to individuals' awareness of themselves and the options they had open to them. A summary of the words and concepts respondents used to describe these identity formation benefits, is given at Table 1.

Table 1. Words respondents used to describe identity formation in training

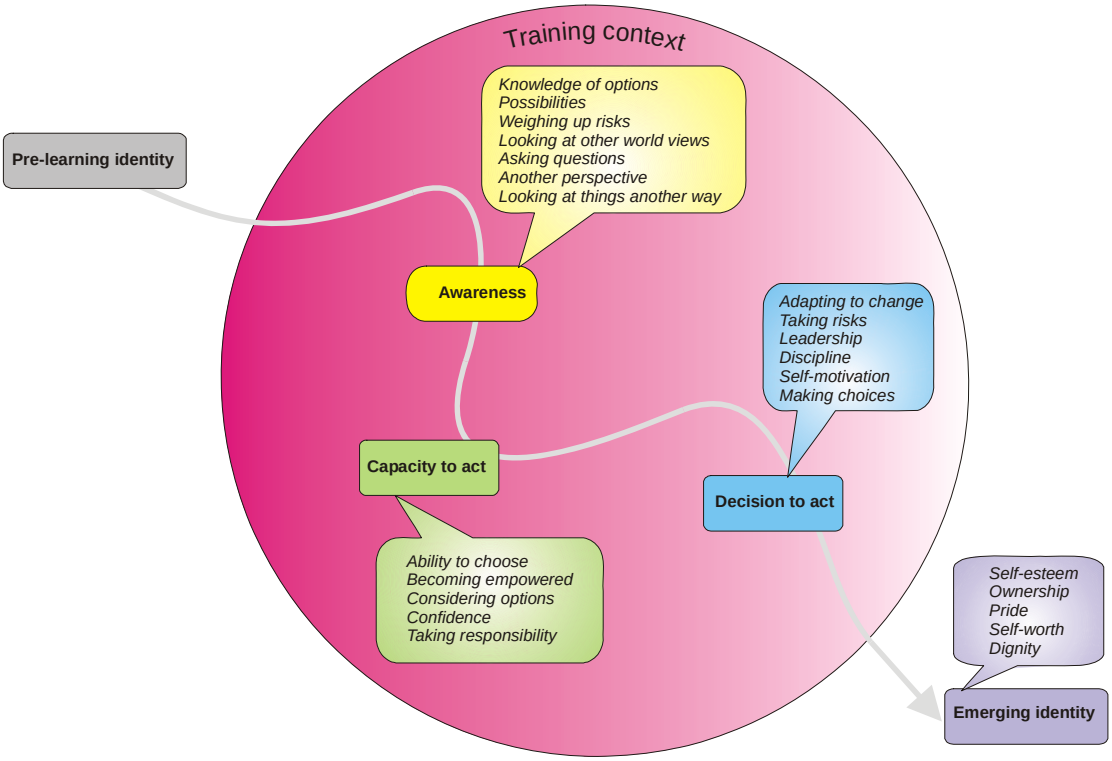
Self-concept	Self-efficacy	Social relationships	Awareness
confidence	making choices	attitude	awareness
dignity	decisions	leadership	broaden horizons
ownership	self-discipline	work ethic	perspective
pride	empowerment	celebration	point of view
recognition	taking opportunities	teamwork	worldview
values	possibilities	engagement	aspirations
self-worth	responsibility	mutual respect	options
self-esteem	self-motivation		understanding opportunity
self-confidence	transformation		knowing choices
enthusiasm	soft skills		
mindset	achievement		

Identity formation in VET: how does it happen?

The data revealed that identity formation in terms of self-concept, self-efficacy, social relationships and awareness was the most often described ingredient of effective programs. However an important question, which will be discussed here, is: how does

training aid the process of identity formation? Drawn from inferences in the data, Figure 2, is an attempt to answer this question.

Figure 2. A model for identity formation through training



The shaded circle represents the training context. This could be among other things, for example, about the workplace, the relationship with the trainer and other trainees and interaction with the resources. The literature supports a view that identity is never formed in a vacuum. The literature cited earlier described identity formation as a socially 'interactive process' (Jopling 2000; Elliott 2001; Purdie *et al* 2000). Falk and Balatti (2003) emphasised the importance of 'storying' and 'place identity' in learning. Therefore, the context of training in the diagram below is vitally important.

The data suggests that as a person enters training they begin with what is described as a 'pre-learning identity'. This is important to take into account because the identity the individual comes to training with will influence his or her capacity to engage with the training context. For example an individual who comes to training with an identity as a 'non-English speaker' will have a number of limitations, especially where the training environment depends heavily on English literacy and numeracy.

However, assuming that the training context does take into account the individual's pre-learning identity, the first thing that training does is *raise awareness*. Respondents expressed this in terms of 'knowledge of options', 'weighing up risks', 'getting another perspective' and 'looking at things another way'. This step in the process of identity formation is important because it widens the field or scope of opportunity for trainees. It relates to the Clemans *et al* (2003) 'learning to know' category of ACE outcomes described previously.

Next, training raises an individual's *capacity to act*. In other words choices that were previously unavailable, become available. Options that were not previously thought of, are considered. Respondents often spoke of this in terms of 'empowerment' and 'confidence'. They described how trainees' new knowledge and skill gave them the

power to choose their own destiny. This was sometimes associated with ideas of 'taking responsibility'. This is consistent with an NCVER (2005) finding that showed that the greatest benefit perceived by Indigenous Australians was related to 'self-confidence and feeling better about self'. In a study of the impacts of learning, Schuller *et al* (2002) confirm that self-confidence is the single most significant outcome from training.

> The most fundamental and pervasive benefit from learning of every kind is a growth in self-confidence. This is probably the most commonly reported effect from all relevant research, and our study confirms it. (p. 14)

From a capacity to act, training then facilitates the *decision to act*. It is interesting to note in Schuller *et al*'s work cited above, that confidence leads to a number of possible actions at the individual and collective level.

- to draw on and make sense of their own personal experience;
- to put forward their own views;
- to acknowledge mistakes;
- to confront problems rather than hide from them;
- to challenge the views of others;
- to ask for help;
- to accept the views of others even though these may differ from their own;
- to accept the views of others even though this entails them changing their own viewpoint;
- to put themselves in unfamiliar situations;
- to communicate more effectively with professionals, notably on health or education matters;
- to communicate more effectively within family or personal relationships;
- to make themselves available to others, e.g. as a problem-solving resource;
- actively to offer help to friends, neighbours or family;
- to perform more effectively in their different social roles, i.e. generally to raise their levels of social competence and contribution;
- to take on new roles and responsibilities in the family and community. (pp. 14-15)

The above findings are entirely consistent with the way respondents in this research report the decision to act: in terms of adapting to change, taking on responsibility, taking on leadership roles, taking risks, being disciplined and making choices. They are a mix of individual and socially related actions. The actions are also consistent with the 'learning to do' category proposed by Clemans *et al* (2003), which similarly describes learning outcomes in terms of individual and collective actions. As noted earlier many of these actions are commonly referred to in literature as employability skills, which are frequently cited as desirable by employers. One of the reasons that these attributes are so difficult to place into a training package framework of units and elements of competency and be measured (Curtis 2004) is that they are not necessarily related to job tasks, but are tied inextricably to an individual's identity.

It is evident from this research that what training does for an individual is to build an individual's capacity to act, not only to perform the measurable technical skills required for the job—that is they can do it or they cannot do it—but to engage in less measurable actions—described in terms of leadership, risk taking, discipline etc.—that cross the boundaries of units and elements of competency.

The model proposed in Figure 2 suggests that the end result of this learning activity—which could in fact be part of an ongoing learning cycle, of which this is just one iteration—is an *emerging identity*. This identity is expressed in terms of self-esteem, ownership, pride, self-worth and sense of dignity. At the end of an effective training program, the participant has a fresh answer to the fundamental question "who am I?". The answer to the question is shaped by the training process, represented by the rope, which winds its way through the training context.

Conclusions

Identity formation emerges as a strong theme in the author's PhD research, which explored the nature of effective training programs in a variety of community contexts. While it may be difficult to measure identity formation—it is certainly beyond the scope of a training assessor to do this—it is very feasible to build identity forming processes into a training program. The findings suggest that identity is progressively built in effective programs through engagement with the training context: first by raising awareness or expanding horizons, second by giving participants the capacity to act, and third by empowering participants to make choices. The end result is an emerging self-concept that exhibits itself in higher self-esteem, pride and self-worth.

While there is much talk about assessing employability skills, these really need to be separated into two baskets: those that are related to individual skills and knowledge formation—and which are assessable—and those that are related to building identity—and which are not assessable. Employability skills such as personal values, attitudes and self-esteem need to be built into program design but cannot properly be assessed by a training practitioner. They are not the basis of performance criteria in the same way that skills and knowledge are. There is no doubt however that it is possible to create a program that builds participants' awareness, their capacity to act and their decision to act.

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