

Role of work-integrated learning in developing professionalism and professional identity

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There is an increasing focus on the student as the nexus of integrating classroom and workplace learning. In the university context students are learners and in the workplace context students are pre-accredited professionals and in both contexts they can be facilitators of peer learning. Student participation in professional roles through workplace learning experiences are opportunities for transformative learning that shape professional identity formation and a sense of professionalism. Drawing on a higher education literature review of professional identity formation and a case study that explored how professionalism was understood, talked about and experienced by lecturers and students, this paper explores the role of work-integrated learning and its place in the curriculum to enhance professional identity development and professionalism. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2012, 13(3), 159-167)

Keywords: identity, professional identity formation, professionalism, work-integrated learning, critical, participation, dialogues

Every professional has a professional identity, the question is how conscious and purposefully chosen it is. It is impossible to imagine a professional without a professional identity; but it is possible that professionals cannot articulate their professional values and commitments hence cannot purposefully draw on the core of their identity. Identifying with values and moral principles often remains tacit and non-conscious (Nyström, 2009). As work-integrated learning scholars, it is our role to prepare students for their future work roles. Work role preparation includes not only disciplinary knowledge and technical skills but also intelligence about how to work in a team, communicate with others, learn tacit ways of working through observations and socializing into workplace cultures. Helping students develop a sense of professional identity and engage with issues of professionalism can enhance workplace learning experiences. It strengthens a sense of purpose and focus to work-integrated learning (WIL). This paper explores the phenomenon of professional identity formation and professionalism and what role WIL can play in this. It argues that WIL is an ideal space to develop professional identity and professionalism because it is the space that occupies both learning and work. Three broad principles are proposed for a work-integrated learning curriculum that can enhance the development of professional identity and professionalism.

HIGHER EDUCATION LITERATURE AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

The role of higher education is contested and includes educating students for global citizenship to producing work-ready graduates. The former tends to foreground the notion of values, ethics and developing professional identities whereas the latter focuses on work training and employability. The following questions clarify the role given to professional identity development in higher education and WIL:

What is professional identity and professionalism?

What is the purpose of your work-integrated learning program?

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How does the approach to work-integrated learning address professional identity and professionalism?

Where in the curriculum is your work-integrated learning program?

These questions formed the basis of a literature review (Trede, Macklin & Bridges, 2011) that explored current understandings and debates in higher education journals about the theory and practice of professional identity development, and its key messages for learning and teaching in higher education. The review found that there was only tangential discussion of professional identity. The main focus of reviewed articles was on professional reasoning, personal epistemologies, decision making processes, reflective practice and the process of entering a community of practice.

Only 20 of the 192 articles identified referred to professional identity development formation explicitly and even then they did not squarely focus on professional identity formation. Most papers located their theoretical frameworks in Giddens' work on self-identity, and structure and agency (Giddens, 1991). From a pedagogical framework perspective, the papers referred to community of practice and situated learning, reflective practice, critical pedagogy and experiential learning. The key message taken from this review of professional identity formation was that higher education focuses on pedagogy and related learning and teaching strategies, and it is implied that professional identity is formed along the way. The experience of attending a university course in itself was seen to automatically impact on students' professional identity development.

Only seven of the 20 articles in the literature review made reference to professional identity development at the intersection of university and work. Some of these articles claimed that workplaces strongly shape professional identity development and it is not the role of universities (West & Chur-Hansen, 2004). However, others advocated that universities should capitalize on the opportunities to help students reflect and make sense of work-integrated learning experiences. The phenomenon of multiple memberships of different communities was seen to enable students to clarify their professional identity development, yet others contested this (Bramming 2007). Forming professional identity is a significant, yet often hidden, outcome of WIL. Should identity development be facilitated and steered, or should students be left to form their own identity? Leaving professional identity formation up to 'osmosis' is a risky undertaking. Students may unquestioningly affiliate and identify with current practices. They reproduce what they observe, what they are exposed to, what already exists, and they replicate the practice that they will be assessed against. There is a danger in not appraising workplace experiences. Not using the opportunities for critical meaning making can unintentionally foster stereotyping. A further downside of not critically reflecting on practice experiences is that students may learn undesirable habits without realizing this (Brookfield, 2012). When I asked a nurse student who returned from clinical placement what she had learnt, she said she learnt to hate older people. And when I asked physiotherapy students, they said that they can only question and reflect on practice issues as much as their work-integrated learning supervisors would allow them to. These anecdotes serve as a reminder that critical awareness raising and sense making are important to enhance students' development of their sense of professional self and connecting self to professional identity.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY

An existential definition of self-identity has been described as “to know what one is doing and why one is doing it” (Giddens 1991, p.35). This implies a reflexive consciousness and an *external* (strategic) identity. It also implies that people can articulate the reasons behind their actions. It is important to note that beyond knowing and doing, articulating reasons and actions is part of developing professional identity. Many actions are non-conscious and, or emotional, and they are difficult to make conscious. Eraut (2000) argues that non-conscious learning and tacit knowledge needs to be made explicit through collective reflective dialogues in order to share practice knowledge and develop expertise. To him, it is imperative to illuminate tacit aspects of practice. For practice to be learnt, and for professional identity to be formed, it is necessary to be able to share and articulate motivations for actions.

There are some theoretical ideas of identity that I classified into three broad concepts and I draw on the work of Giddens (1991), Habermas (1987, 2004) and Bauman (2005a):

1. The conscious self at the centre of professional identity development;
2. The power of social relations; and
3. The power of language and discourse.

The first concept is the conscious self. Self at the centre means that the world is seen through the eyes of the observer. Self-identity develops with experience. Who we are is our past. We constantly have experiences that shape self. Placements provide rich experiences that cannot be totally controlled, not even in today’s risk-averse society. To a degree, risk, doubt and ambiguity in workplace situations are unavoidable and accepting them means to accept that things can go wrong, and that the future cannot be controlled entirely. Good practice requires responsible practitioners who are aware of self and others, who can make appropriate situated decisions and can see other possibilities. Such practitioners are learners. The *once self* from the past is constantly evolving towards the *future self* without exactly predicting where it is heading. The conscious self is fluid and constantly transforming based on critically learning from experiences.

The second concept relates to professional relationships where the self is de-centred and placed within a cultural and collective sphere (Habermas, 2004). Self does not exist by itself and on its own. Self identity is always related to others. The relational aspect de-centres self. Identity is understood as a social construct. Social relations are the external forces that influence the self. The personal affects the social and vice versa. Identity is shaped by both self and others. To realize that there is ‘me’ and ‘the other’ assists students to position themselves within professional groups. This realization is the starting point for making clear connections between the two which leads to the third concept.

The third concept of identity is the power of dialogue between self and the other (Habermas, 1987). The discursive concept describes how people talk about themselves and others, how they position themselves and where they locate themselves within a professional community. There are many discourses of identity and the tensions between them, allowing new possibilities of identity to emerge. For example, school teachers can adopt professional identities of being knowledge experts, facilitators of learning, role models or life coaches.

These broad theoretical concepts point to a need to know who we are, how we fit in with others, and the participatory process of negotiating our fit with others – actively identifying and differentiating self with and from others. The power of language points to a pedagogy that articulates awareness raising and engagement with others (Brookfield, 2012); but it does not detract from the importance of engagement with self, the whole self – not just the head and the hands, but also the heart (Galvin & Todres, 2007). Professional identity development requires a pedagogy that includes emotional and relational ways of knowing and cultivates critical thinking within contexts (Brookfield, 2012).

Further, from these theoretical concepts of identity the importance of engaging with self and with communities of practice can be gleaned. WIL programs where students are exposed to various communities of practice and join multiple group memberships, can be conceived as the space in the curriculum where professional identity is tested, threatened and reshaped. WIL provides opportunities where the world of work is brought into the classroom and where students go to authentic workplace settings. WIL is the in-between space, the space where self and professional meet. Students are the ones who traverse these spaces. Academics are at university, and work-integrated learning educators are at work but students are learners in both, and all three stakeholders of work-integrated learning shape, consciously or not, the development of students' professional identities.

Bauman (2005b), a contemporary philosopher, warns that identity is slippery and fluid. It would be misleading to believe professional identity is static and once students have graduated their values are set in concrete. Bauman rejects such an understanding of identity and suggests identity is constantly re-written. Identity is the reflexive re-writing of self. Bauman contends that in today's postmodern or liquid modern times where everything and especially values, knowledge and practice is in constant flux, identity is highly contested (Bauman, 2005a). He claims that no matter how self-reflexive one is in shaping a self-identity, some things just have to be done. It is difficult and contested to define what a good professional is, because it varies according to workplace cultures and policies. Professional identity is interdependent with the structural context and the situations of others. Critics of explicitly addressing professional identity development formation argue that focusing explicitly on professional identity formation aligns too closely with social engineering (Barnett, 2010). Professional identity cannot be forced onto students, as students form their own professional identity.

It seems that professional identity is closely interwoven with context, and moulded by past experiences and practice traditions. Bauman (2005a), together with other scholars of critical perspectives (e.g. Brookfield, 2012), claims that just like practice, professional identity is never neutral. Both professional identity and practice are always viewed through a particular lens and world view. He urged for the engaged student. An engaged student develops a critical professional identity through careful critique of current practices and values. Engaged students involve themselves in debates about practice decisions and about practice experiences because this will enable them to consciously and actively form their professional identity. The starting point for understanding self, others and how one is situated within a practice and profession, is to explore and understand how one views the world. Self becoming leads to self-assurance, self-confidence and fosters intention and cohesion for professional identity development. But such a self-identity does not make for a well rounded professional identity beyond a self-focus as the three conceptual ideas of identity suggest.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND PROFESSIONALISM

Professionalism informs decision making and judgment-based practice (Higgs, McAllister & Whiteford, 2009). Professionalism is informed by professional identity. Professionalism comprises more than rules because it is a fluid concept, highly dependent on context. Fish and de Cossart (2006) claim that the competencies-based approach to understanding professionalism alludes to a masterable practice and erodes the notion of professionalism. A competencies approach tries to fix and make static what professionalism is. Professionalism cannot be mastered and cannot be seen as being accountable against a set of rules. Professionalism needs to be seen as a responsibility to make judgments and decisions in the context of practice. Contemporary professionalism might need to be underpinned by a professional identity that is about knowing what one stands for and, closely linked to this, is professionalism which is taking responsibility for one's action. Professional identity formation means becoming aware of what matters most in practice, what values and interests shape decision making. Being, thinking and acting as a professional are underpinned by professionalism and a sense of professional identity.

Case study

Grace and Trede (2011) explored how students and lecturers in two professional entry courses (dietetics and physiotherapy) perceived and discussed professionalism. They hypothesized that in an educational context focused on skill mastery and graduate-level competence, the notion of professionalism could be reduced to measurable and rules-based concepts. Such a context could overlook the values, professional identity, ethical decision-making, and professional responsibility that underpin professional practice. Grace and Trede found that both, formal education in the classroom and learning in clinical placements, played equally important roles in developing a sense of professionalism during undergraduate education. The study highlighted that students are active observers who make judgments on what they observe.

It [a sense of what professionalism is] came indirectly through lecturers and looking at how they dress, how they act towards their students and just how they interact with each other. I think you just pick up things. (Final year dietetics student)

Personally I wasn't thinking about aspects of professionalism [on practicum]. (First year dietetics student)

There was an impoverished perception and understanding of professionalism. It appeared that dietetic students had not explicitly picked up the richer notion of professionalism. In contrast, physiotherapy students were exposed to discussion of values. They were asked to make links to professionalism from year 1.

For our first assessment we had to hand in a power point presentation about our values and how they related to our professional behavior in practice. We had to provide detailed examples of our values. (Final year physiotherapy student)

Students compared what they had been taught and had experienced in practice but required skilled facilitated opportunities to explore their ideas, to share and integrate their knowledge and insights about professionalism and to expand their emotions.

Lecturers acknowledged the difficulty of teaching professionalism. They saw professionalism as being implied in the curriculum.

In my experience, clinical supervisors are very reluctant to complain about students' professional behavior. I think it is because those things are tacit, and hard to pin down. (Physiotherapy lecturer)

I would like to think that implicit in the other subjects is that sense of professionalism. The clinical subjects are very heavily focused on how to manage a patient. I think there are a lot of hidden messages that come across in other subjects. (Dietetics lecturer)

Lecturers discussed the pervasiveness of professionalism and its importance for future practice. However, the shift from the implicitness to the explicitness of professional identity had not been realized. There was no deliberate design of a course curriculum that overtly integrated the theme of professionalism.

Grace and Trede (2011) found that students had a narrow conceptual understanding of professionalism. They called for professionalism to be problematized and critiqued so that current concepts of professionalism are challenged, reaffirmed or modified and adapted to new contexts. Student participants in this study appeared to accept unconditionally their lecturers and clinical supervisors as role models. Students could learn more from their workplace experiences if they were cued in to look out for particular aspects of professionalism and given further opportunities to discuss and critique their observations and experiences. By the end of their course, they appeared, with little questioning, to have been socialized to professional hierarchies including the professional behaviors of their lecturers and clinical educators. Students learnt a great deal about professionalism from their clinical educators and their role could have greater recognition in the professionalism curriculum of university courses.

PEDAGOGY FOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

WIL seems to be an ideal space to develop professional identity and professionalism because a WIL program prepares students for practice and includes: learning professional roles, Understanding workplace cultures; professionalizing and socializing into a community of practice; and developing agentic workforce participants. WIL is the space where professional identity formation should be stimulated and initiated. The common features of professional identity development and WIL are that they are complex, fluid and pervasive. They traverse different spaces: self as learner and as professional; self at university and in workplaces; and learning about theory and practice.

Professional identity development is a lens that can be used to make sense of experiences, practice and work (Nyström, 2009). Professional identity development shapes and is shaped by work-integrated learning experiences. Campbell and Zegwaard (2011) called for explicit approaches of WIL in developing students' professional identities. They affirmed that universities play a key role in assisting students to navigate through workplace experiences. This role calls for critical preparation and appraisal of work experiences. To actively capitalize on the opportunities to form professional identity development and a sense of professionalism for future practice in a practice world that is constantly in flux, a critical approach seems a fitting match (Bauman, 2005a).

A critical approach to WIL has the goal of preparing students to contribute actively to practice. This approach explores professional relations and raises awareness of practices that are not beneficial for the self and the common good (Brookfield, 2012). A critical pedagogical approach does not accept that practice is neutral, objective and standardized; neither is it

sufficient to think critically by considering other possible perspectives. A critical pedagogy is underpinned by the belief that professionals need to be following up on their moral responsibility with action (Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Brookfield & Holst, 2011). Thus a critical approach requires participation. It is a reciprocal participation where students and educators engage in a dialogue to scrutinize what and how professionals think and act with the aim of making values and interests explicit. A critical approach to learning requires a shift in learning and teaching roles from *we teach and they learn* to facilitating learning through enabling partnerships between students and educators.

It is vital that students are active yet strategic participants in workplaces because workplaces are not neutral places. The complex interrelationship that students have to negotiate with their future professional community is key to developing their professional identity. Students who critically observe practice and practice critically, think for themselves and actively listen to others, can claim a sense of control over their professional journey and professional becoming. Such students are cultivating learning, and persistently developing their professional identity. Academic educators' prime role is to instill curiosity, encourage sustained commitment to confronting practice problems and respond to them (Brookfield, 2012). Because university education cannot control workplace affordances, the preparation and appraisal of workplace experiences is important (Billett, 2009).

From this discussion of critical approaches to WIL, the following three principles can be crystallized for a critical WIL curriculum that enhances professional identity and professionalism:

1. Problematizing participation;
2. Generating a discourse of professionalism and professional identity; and
3. Capacity building in students and mentors to question.

These principles underpin pedagogical strategies that facilitate a purposeful development of professional identity and professionalism. All three principles are closely interconnected. Student participation in work-integrated learning is not a smooth transition: it needs to be problematized. The aim of problematizing participation is to get to the roots of difficulties that students might feel encourage or hinder their full participation. There are unequal power relations between student and workplace educator. Workplace educators might be unskilled in facilitating student learning, students might be unsure on how to participate, and the workplace culture might be hostile and workloads busy (Fuller, 2007). Full participation is further complicated because students are assessed by their workplace educators which may jeopardize authentic learning. Not all students feel invited to move towards more fully participating in practice, and not all students want to (Trede & Smith, 2012). Students will be better equipped to strategically negotiate their levels of participation once these complex issues are brought to the surface. Cultivating a dialogue between academics and students in preparation and appraisal of workplace experiences is key to helping students participate. Closely related to this dialogue is the second principle of collectively discussing and collaborating in practice.

Generating a discourse about professional identity and professionalism will enhance students' observation skills of the workplace. Sharing, questioning and resolving their observations and experiences with others is a preparatory step in shaping professional values that underpin professional identities (Brookfield, 2012). The literature review and the case

study discussed above both revealed that there is insufficient attention paid to discussing professional identity and professionalism in the curriculum. This is despite the fact that workplaces provide ample opportunities for critical discussion. Collective critical discussions potentially widen students' horizons and strengthen their learning journey. Students can reflect upon professionalism from an outsider perspective looking onto practice in classroom settings and from an emerging insider perspective discussing practice from within (Kemmis, 2009). Generating a discourse enables students to consciously think, talk together and act professionally. It also signals to students that professional identity is an important primer for their future practice.

The final principle of building capacity to question is crucial to developing a self-owned professional identity. Workplaces raise many questions for students. It is common that students and novice practitioners seek certainty in practice. They are looking for clear answers to their questions. However, not all questions are a powerful tool for learning (Cranton, 2011). Questions that require a 'yes' or 'no' answer arrest further dialogue. Within a critical pedagogy framework, questions are inquisitive and invite further discussion (Trede & Higgs, 2010). For example, an inquisitive question could be "What stopped you from calling the doctor?" and the closed questioning version would be "Why didn't you call the doctor?" The latter question calls for a short, defensive response whereas the former invites further reasoning about actions. Asking inquisitive questions is a powerful tool for growth and exploring other possibilities (Peavey & Hutchison, 1992). Inquisitive questions reveal ambiguity and uncertainty. They invite deeper thinking and connecting values and reason to action. Such reflexive practice invites students to question themselves and others as to why they are doing what they are doing. Discussions that flow from critical questions enable the responder to further develop their existing ideas. An unquestioned practice will breed an unquestioned identity. Students' commitments to challenge practices require nurturing and rewarding. This is no easy task in current assessment-driven times that focus on outcomes and neglect dispositions for learning.

CONCLUSION

Debating professional identity and professionalism and its development in students should be grounded on a theoretical and pedagogical platform. Such debates require the involvement of all stakeholders of WIL because all influence and shape professional identity. WIL as the link to develop professional identity formation between university and work has enormous pedagogical potential and should be explicitly stated. This paper suggests that WIL and professional identity formation should be embedded throughout a course curriculum. If the aim is to educate students to become critical, considerate, global citizens and lifelong learners then this should be addressed in all spaces of learning.

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This paper was presented at the Australian Collaborative Education Network NSW/ACT seminar in October, 2011.



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