# Vocational Learning in the Frame of a Developing Identity

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## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to argue a case for the development of training programs that deliberately build in identity formation into program outcomes—rather than relying only on skills formation and or job readiness. The premise for the argument arises from the author's observations of learning programs at a variety of levels over a number of years and as a direct consequence of his PhD findings. The paper first considers the literature relating to the outcomes of adult learning programs and then goes on to review the linkages between learning and identity. It revisits findings from the author's PhD, which support the case for a fresh focus on identity formation.

## 2 Literature review

### *2.1 Vocational learning defined*

While we could define vocational learning in fairly narrow terms around what is sometimes described as the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, I will use the term 'vocational learning' in this paper to encompass the wider sphere of adult learning that relates to learning that occurs in preparation for a vocation, in anticipation of a change in career, for re-entry into the workforce or as part of ongoing professional development. Stasz and Wright (2004) for example, writing within a UK context suggest the following definition:

> *Vocational learning can be defined as any activities and experiences that lead to understandings of and/or skills relevant to a range of (voluntary and paid) work environments.*

In Australia, the *MCEETYA Framework for Vocational Education in Schools*, acknowledges that vocational learning should provide opportunity for students "to learn in workplace and community settings" (DEEWR 2007: Key element 2: Enterprise and vocational learning), though most states interpret the framework more in terms of work or employment than community (ACACA 2008).

### *2.2 Successful outcomes of vocational learning*

A scan of the literature on outcomes of vocational learning or training reveals a high concentration of results around the relationship between training and employment. And this, given the foregoing discussions of definitions, is perhaps not surprising.

However, when the search goes deeper and considers what determines a *successful* outcome for various stakeholder groups a different picture emerges. For *individuals* success may be defined in terms of graduation, access to a job, satisfaction with what was learned, as well as other job related benefits—and indeed this is how the National Centre for Vocational Education Research measure student outcomes (NCVER 2007). For *industry* successful learning outcomes may be better described in terms of meeting the skills needs of businesses and enterprises a view reflected by various industry groups (e.g. Australian Industry Group and The Allen Consulting Group 2006; TAFE Directors Australia 2007) or it may be about increasing productivity and workforce participation (e.g. Mitchell and McKenna 2008). For *communities* a range of outcomes may reflect employment priorities but may also equally reflect social capital priorities relating to building trust, cooperative learning environments and enabling leadership (e.g. Balatti and Falk 2000; Falk and Smith 2003; Guenther et al. 2008b). For *governments* as a major funder of training, the outcomes are likely to be related to their policy directions, for example transitioning people from welfare to work (Guenther et al. 2008a) or ensuring that skills gaps are filled (e.g. Richardson and Teese 2006) to ensuring that young people move into an appropriate career (Curtis 2008). Success for *providers* may be as much as about service delivery, organisational efficiency and capacity as it is about outcomes for clients as employers and trainees (Maxwell et al. 2004).

What this brief overview shows is that successful outcomes are not just about employment and skills. While the role of identity formation is not included in the above overview I will return to it after a brief explanation of what is meant by the term 'identity'.

## *2.3 Identity*

Identity can be thought simply as an expression of 'who I am'. But what shapes this 'self' comes from within—psychologically—and from those around us—sociologically and anthropologically. Erikson in *Identity and the Life Cycle* (Erikson 1980) distinguishes between, 'ego identity', 'personal identity' and 'group identity'. These three classifications roughly align with the psychological, sociological anthropological views. In the case of 'group identity' for example historical and cultural roots are embedded in an individual's identity. Writing in the 1950s, Erikson (1980:20), illustrated the concept with an example from Sioux culture in which he notes that in such an identity, "the prehistoric past is a powerful psychological reality". He describes the 'ego identity' as a learned sense of self that is "developing into a defined ego within a social reality" (p. 22). The 'personal identity' then is more about an individual's awareness of themselves and others' view of their individuality or "selfsameness and continuity in time" (p. 22). While Erikson's work is formed on the basis of a psychoanalytic perspective others have considered identity more from a sociological or anthropological perspective. For example, sociologist Berger (1963:119) suggests that "the individual locates himself in society within systems of social control, and everyone of these contains an identity-generating apparatus". There is of course several points of intersection among these perspectives. 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)*

Of particular relevance to this paper is Erikson's understanding that identity of individuals changes over the life cycle from childhood, through adolescence into adulthood[1]. Further, the nature of one's emerging identity is affected by any number of intersecting contributing factors, which include the role of 'teachers, judges and psychiatrists' in shaping a young person's identity. Erikson (1980) goes on to conclude that if:

> *'a young person… is close to choosing a negative identity, that young person way well put his energy into becoming exactly what the careless and fearful community expects him to be—and make a total job of it' (p. 175)*

His point is that any number of interventions in a young person's life can make a difference to this emerging identity and that if professional service providers are not careful, those who are tempted toward deviant or socially non-conforming behaviours, may well draw on their experiences to reinforce these negative identities.

## *2.4 Vocational learning and identity*

The outcomes and outputs of education and learning are seldom described as 'successful' in terms of identity formation. That is, the products of training programs are more likely to be described in terms of what a person can *do* with their new skills and knowledge, as opposed to what they can *become*. The earlier discussion on 'success' in learning demonstrated that traditionally, successful learning has been related to outcomes such as employment, skills competence, academic achievement, satisfaction with training, work performance and completions. While these things 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 outcomes, many of which are directly related to identity formation. They place these outcomes under the heading of 'learning to be: growth in well-being and self-awareness'. They describe these in terms of self concept and community identity. Many of the outcomes related to self-concept are described as soft skills, generic, employability skills and more specifically in terms of self-esteem and self-confidence and sometimes in terms of basic literacy and numeracy (e.g. Brown et al. 2003; Curtin 2004; The Allen Consulting Group 2004).

However, much of the literature sees these employability skills in a fairly limited frame—one in which soft skills are a pre-requisite to the 'real' learning that occurs in formal education. Billet and Somerville (2004:324) contend that identity, work and learning are indeed an 'under-

[1] I acknowledge that this view of identity is not universally accepted. For example, Indigenous peoples' identity may not be as fluid as this view, being more permanently aligned to kin and country than in what may be viewed as a social status or role.

appreciated and neglected focus for research, policy and practice in adult learning'. At this point it may be useful to introduce the term 'identity capital', which Schuller (in Schuller et al. 2004b) defines as 'the characteristics of the individual that define his or her outlook and self-image' (p. 20). Schuller's understanding of identity capital is to some extent drawn from Côté's work (e.g. Côté 2001; Côté 2005), which differentiates identity capital from other forms of capital such as human and social capital. While it may be helpful to see identity formation as a benefit or outcome of learning as Côté and others (e.g. Hammond 2004) do, it is perhaps better to refer to identity as both an asset and an outcome—something that can be both drawn on and built. Schuller et al (2004a), for example describe the difference:

> *Identity capital embodies or generates returns to the individual, though it is odd to express it in these terms. Self-confidence and self-efficacy are themselves positive assets, but also generate further positive returns because of the way they enable people to function effectively (pp. 15-16).*

In other words, when a person engages in learning he or she brings an identity to their learning and this is built in the process of learning. Additionally a failure to attend to the individual's identity capital may lead to short term competence but may not lead to sustained changes in practices required for long term. Wenger (1998:268) argues that

> *Deep transformative experiences that involve new dimensions of identification and negotiability, new forms of membership, multimembership and ownership of meaning… are likely to be more widely significant in terms of the long-term ramifications of learning than extensive coverage of a broad, but abstractly general, curriculum.*

The danger is that where practices are embedded in culture and new ways of doing things are taught in order to transform those practices, in the short term conformance to competencies may be achieved but in the longer term—because the culturally embedded practice is still retained—the individual may well revert to the way they know to be true from their culture. An example of this might be where violent offenders are taught new skills for anger management—and demonstrate that they can use those skills—without a changed identity. Ultimately, the violent behaviours will return in accordance with their enculturated understanding of how to behave.

With this literature in mind, the paper turns to findings from the author's own PhD research, which was titled "Vocational education and training (VET) as a tool for regional planning and management: Case studies from Australian tropical savanna communities".

# 3 Findings from research about effective vocational learning in northern Australia

The author's PhD research project asked three questions: 1. What are the indicators of well-being across the savanna?; 2. What is the link between education and learning and capacity-

building in savanna communities?; and 3. How can education and learning be applied effectively to produce capacity-building outcomes? Using a mixed methods design, the project began with a statistical assessment of well-being in the savanna to answer the first question. This was used as a basis for site selection of four case studies of the effective application of VET. Three were in the Northern Territory and one was in Queensland. Qualitative data from the cases was analysed using NUD*IST software to answer the second and third questions and to build a theoretical framework. The findings and discussion presented in this paper represent a small part of the overall research project.

The data used for the research was 103 interviews with 132 respondents, who described 114 discrete training programs. Respondents were a mix of providers, trainees, industry representatives, government and community stakeholders. Respondents were asked to describe a program that they considered 'effective' and to then explain why they thought it was.

Out of these interviews a total of 1015 responses were identified that related directly to 'effective' programs. These responses are essentially key extracts from the respondents' descriptions of effective programs, coded using NUD*IST™ and quantitized using MS Access™, according to one of the six categories: needs; motivators; enablers; delivery aspects; identity aspects; and outcomes. A summary of the 1015 responses is shown in Figure 1. The chart shows that the largest group of responses (24.2 per cent of all responses) related to delivery aspects of training. This was followed by identity aspects (21.8 per cent); enablers (17.0 per cent); motivators (15.4 per cent); outcomes (14.5 per cent); and needs (7.1 per cent).

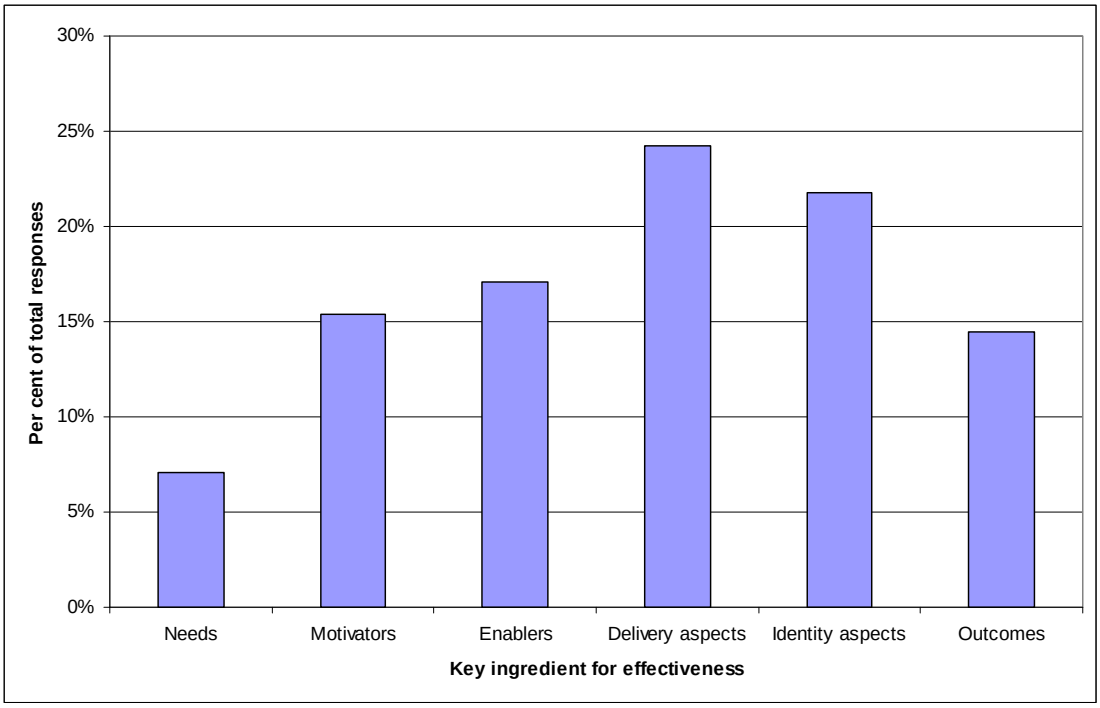


**Figure 1 How respondents perceived key ingredients of effective training programs (n = 1015, multiple responses allowed)**

While the relative strength of perceived effectiveness in terms of 'delivery aspects' (which related to content, qualification, delivery and the trainer) may not be surprising, what did come as somewhat of a surprise (given the literature on vocational learning for job outcomes) was the relative strength of the responses related to identity aspects of the training. That is, there were more responses in the interview data that related to effectiveness being related to identity than there were related to outcomes. For example respondents were more likely to suggest that training was effective because of what it did for their self-esteem, awareness of options and self-confidence, than what it enabled them to achieve in terms of job related outcomes. Put in another way, respondents in this research felt that identity aspects of training were more important than what the training actually led them to be able to do.

The following case study is designed to illustrate in some detail the extent to which identity contributes to the perceived effectiveness of training. It is just one example of many that shows this.

## *3.1 Case study: 'Planning your career'*

Mining communities in Australia are focussed on extracting minerals from the ground. Some communities are fly-in fly-out sites—shift workers only live in town while they are on a shift roster and then fly 'home' to where their family lives. Other communities are largely residential in nature—workers live in purpose-built towns and their families live with them there. This case study draws on research conducted in one such town in central Queensland.

To a large extent mines that support such communities depend on a range of specific trade skills to operate and maintain machinery required for the work. Traditionally in Australia these skills are held by males. While the patterns of employment are gradually changing, females in these communities—many of which are relatively remote—are either not employed or employed part time in a small number of administration, retail or financial support roles. Many women have a primary role in parenting children and many are actively engaged in community service work. Many are looking for opportunities to gain employment or build skills so that when they eventually return to an urban environment or their children 'move on' to further education or employment elsewhere, they have an opportunity to build their own career.

In one community an adult learning centre was set up and funded jointly by the mining company and the state education department to assist such women. The centre hosted a number of courses for a variety of purposes. One was called 'Planning your career'. As part of the research, the coordinator was interviewed and asked questions about 'what makes the training effective?'. Her responses are shown in an edited version of the transcript, in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Examples from transcript that shows identity aspects and outcomes as a result of 'Planning your career'.

| Transcript extract | Identity aspects and outcomes identified |
|---|---|
| **It's a long-term program it goes for nine months. There are fifteen participants it's all free for them.** There are ladies whose husbands are working seven day rosters there are ladies who are single parents. We have a Russian lady. We have a lady from Switzerland who hasn't been in town for very long. **And I can just see** their increase in self-confidence and skills is amazing**. I sat in and did some interviews with them, pretend interviews with them,** couldn't believe that they were the same people that I had actually inducted into the course three months prior. **It was just amazing and obviously it's a course that's been tried and true because its been around for a long time but it's one that I can say has benefited people from [this community].** | Trainees' identities as migrants, single parents and stay at home wives noted.<br><br>Trainer observes change in self-concept.<br><br>Trainer observed change in personal identity. |
| **I can see that all individuals, participants, trainees and the community benefit from more training.** Obviously the individuals benefit because it can then improve their ability, self-esteem **particularly which we're seeing with planning your career course, ladies that have been out of the workforce for some time. Just reinforcing computer skills and growing in self-confidence.** They are also helping their children when they go home with their training. **So the kids are also—there's a bit of a flow on effect there—getting a bit more. Probably the kids are teaching their mums** but it benefits the whole of the community because people like that feel more confident in taking roles as the secretary, treasurer, for the local soccer club or the swimming club or whatever. **So I can see it as adult training and here computer training here has a flow on effect.** We're also covering a bit in the planning your career course about being self employed**. So it teaches the girls well OK why can't I open a shop, why can't I open a business, 'Why can't I could actually provide some training to someone else? Then I can take on a trainee'.** So obviously that's increasing [the mining company's] productivit**y and generally [giving] back to the community again. So I think adult training here is providing a big service.** | Trainer perceives increase in self-efficacy/capacity and self-esteem Observes increased self-confidence.<br><br>This leads to identity changes as a parent and greater capacity.<br><br>Outcome noted in terms of engagement in community groups but it is because of their confidence.<br><br>Potential outcome: self-employment.<br><br>Potential return (outcome) for mining company identified. |

A number of things are worth commenting on in this extract. *Firstly*, the number of identity aspects recorded is clearly larger than the number of outcomes noted. *Secondly*, the progressive identity change from migrant or single parent to skilled parent and contributing community member is woven into the respondent's commentary. *Thirdly*, the range of identities noted is not restricted to workplace identities—rather, the identities are related to family life, community life *and* life in the workplace.

# 4 Discussion

While it is fair to conclude from the findings of the research described briefly above, that identity formation is an important product of vocational learning does this necessarily have any implications for adult learning practitioners? Should curricula be designed with identity formation in mind? A response to this might surely be: 'OK, training does produce identity changes in learners but that shouldn't derail us from focusing our attention away from skills formation'.

In response to this critique of the arguments presented it may be worthwhile returning to the literature for a moment. Erikson's (1980)argument that a failure to pay attention to identity, particularly in young people could have negative consequences for them and ultimately for society, is particularly pertinent here. If we see training as a vehicle to produce skills necessary for industry (as much of the literature seems to suggest) then we miss the point that training is about developing the capacity of *people*, who have—as the case study highlighted—multiple identities (at home, in the community and at work). Further, if identity change is viewed as a lifelong process that is affected by a combination of transitions through crises, events, experiences, rites of passage, role changes, social enculturation and acculturation processes, which may be 'constructed' or 'discovered' (Côté 1996) through any number of interactions, then the training experience of an individual is only one contributor to that process.

If, as the research findings presented here suggest, identity (trans)formation is an important product of effective training then one of the implications is that in order to be most valuable, training practices and delivery methods ought to build in strategies that will lead to a reconstruction of an individual's identity—or at least a challenge to an individual's pre-existing identity. Thus training and learning approaches that encourage both independent choice, contributing to individual self concept and interdependent 'contributors to civil society, both locally and globally' (Côté 2005), thereby contributing to a collective identity. Further to this, if identity change is important for the adoption and acceptance of new and better ways of doing things then this strengthens the argument for building or rebuilding an individual's identity. Failure to attend to identity transformation in some situations will result in short term compliant competence but soon result in a reversion to old practices as a result of the strength of the individual's alignment to a pre-existing cultural and social identity.

A second implication that emerges relates to training providers' understanding of learners' identities as they enter into the training experience. The result of not doing this is seen in many one-size-fits-all training initiatives where for example, unemployed people are expected to transition into work by participating in a training program. The learnings that have arisen out of Australia's *Welfare to Work* strategy (see for example Guenther et al. 2008a), suggest that training which addresses the complexities of an individual's identity and at the same time offers additional support outside of the training environment, is more likely to work than when that complexity is not taken into account. Again in this situation the focus cannot simply be on

building skills in an individual but must incorporate a range of personal and social interactions that engender a response in the learner, which says "not only can I *do*, but I can also *be*".

Taking this idea a step further, a third implication has more relevance for those providers who are working in cross-cultural contexts. In such instances, the onus is on the trainer to first understand the learner's worldview, which is intertwined with the learner's individual and cultural identity. Among the barriers that the trainer needs to come to terms with are the learner's language, his enculturated values, his spirituality and his knowledge of what is right and wrong. Too often, the expectation in mainstream training, is that the learner must make the effort to bridge this gap, but if providers are to take the importance of identity formation in training seriously, then surely it should be the other way round. Of course there are time and cost implications of providing training in this way. And often the government led policy, which drives service provision, does not take this fully into account.

Having put these propositions, the challenge now may be to test them with intentional development of programs in a variety of contexts, to determine a) how a training program might differ if identity (trans)formation was an intentional part of the learning process; and b) whether or not it is more effective than training conducted with skills and knowledge formation as the primary goal. Testing these propositions would require an evaluation framework that firstly identified a common set of effectiveness measures (initially for participants but later perhaps also for other stakeholders). It would then require some careful curriculum development around existing training programs. Then the training would need to be delivered using both the skills formation and identity formation modes, to similar groups of people. Evaluation of the two programs could then follow.

# 5 Conclusions

The focus of vocational learning in Australia has clearly been on skills development with an emphasis on skills for jobs. The literature does not always show these kind of outcomes are the product of effective training programs and indeed there is some evidence that employability or 'soft' skills are important too. However, with a small number of exceptions, the literature seldom considers the role that identity plays in learning.

The research on which this paper is based shows that, for the 132 stakeholders surveyed, identity aspects of learning were more important than other outcomes, which were mainly related to jobs. What this may suggest is that training focused on skills development alone may be falling short of what learners really need—support for a transitioning identity. Therefore what could be required to meet that need is training delivery approaches that build in identity forming processes, supporting learning that encourages independent choice as well as interdependent contribution to the social and cultural sphere of learners' lives. Further, delivery that fails to take into account the complexities of individual learners' identities will undoubtedly be less effective than training that does. In addition, and of particular importance to cross-cultural contexts, the implication of this research may be that trainers may need to gain a

deeper understanding of learners' social and cultural identities—creating the bridge between identities, instead of expecting learners to do this.

To test the propositions put in this paper, it is proposed that two similar training programs be delivered, one with a focus on identity and the other with a focus on skills and knowledge, and then evaluated.

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