

# Social capital and identity formation from learning

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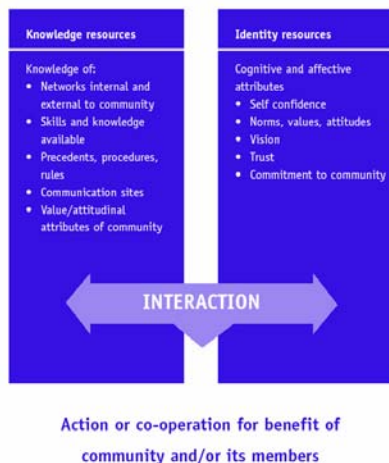
## Introduction

This paper draws on research undertaken by the author towards a PhD, which aims to show how vocational education and training can be used for capacity building in communities of northern Australia's savanna region. The research involved three sites in the Northern Territory and one in Queensland and 102 semi-structured interviews with a range of VET stakeholders. One aspect of the research involved identification of programs that respondents considered to be 'effective'. From the analysis of the data it emerged that identity formation was a key ingredient—ahead of employment outcomes and other variables—contributing to program effectiveness. This paper, drawing on the results of the research, aims to show just how education and training builds identity within a social capital framework.

## Background

The link between learning and social capital has long been made and is variously described by a number of researchers (e.g. Kearns 2004; CRLRA 2001; Kilpatrick *et al* 2001, OECD 2001). While acknowledging the array of alternative approaches to the consideration of a relationship between learning and social capital (e.g. ABS 2001, 2002), a useful model developed by CRLRA clearly shows the relationship between learning, identity and social capital. Drawn from Falk, Golding and Balatti (2000), Figure 1 shows the relationship between knowledge resources, identity resources and action for community benefit. The important connection between the three is shown by the interactions that occur between the three elements.

**Figure 1.** CRLRA model of building and using social capital  
(Source: Falk, Golding & Balatti 2000)



Despite the clear connections between these elements in a social capital framework, the direct connection between learning and identity is seldom made in literature. Within Australia little research has been carried out on this link. 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).

Internationally, the link between learning and identity is made directly by Wenger (1998), specifically in the context of ‘communities of practice’. Wenger distinguishes between the doing, becoming, belonging and experiential aspects of learning. Similarly, Brown (2004), in an exploration of the dynamics of occupational identity and learning describes a series of interactions between the workplace, its members and its activities as part of a model for building identity or ‘becoming’ of the individual.

One of the common threads through this relatively small amount of literature is that identity formation in learning occurs through a series of interactions. These interactions include engagement with learning resources and environment, engagement with people within the learning environment and engagement with those outside the learning environment. The product of these interactions is however unclear. The unanswered question remains: what specifically does involvement in education and training do for the individual that contributes to his or her identity?

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) and are often described under the umbrella of generic skills (Gibb & Curtin 2004) or employability skills (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. However, as Curtis (2004:148) acknowledges: ‘Some of the elements of generic skills more difficult to measure include personal and interpersonal skills’. Underlying the debate about generic skills is a question that is not often asked: Where do generic skills belong? Are they part of the training? Or are they an outcome? I contend that they actually belong in a separate category under a heading of identity.

## Methodology

The research methodology for this project is based on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2000) with a mixed method design (Creswell 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998). Essentially the findings presented in this paper are drawn from two questions out of four in a semi-structured interview with respondents:

1. *Can you give an example of a learning program/course that you have observed or been involved with in this community that has been effective? What made it effective?*
2. *Who are the beneficiaries of education and learning and how do they benefit?*

The responses to these questions were coded according to six categories that emerged from the data. The categories were: needs, motivators, enablers, delivery, identity and outcomes. The factors are summarised below in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of definitions of main coding categories used in analysis**

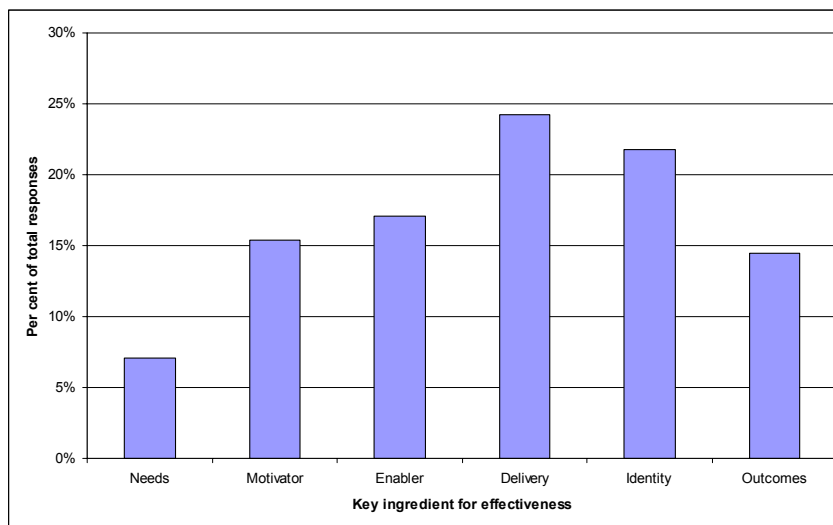
<i>Key ingredients for effectiveness</i>	<i>This means that a key to the program's effectiveness was...</i>
Needs	A recognition of the needs of participants or stakeholders which establishes a <i>reason</i> for doing training
Motivator	An incentive, desired objective, encourager or a threat that provided the <i>impetus</i> for engagement with training
Enabler	A funding source, relational structure, partnership, system or support mechanism that provided the <i>resources</i> for the training
Delivery	An aspect of the course delivery such as the qualities of the trainer or content, the planning and coordination or the qualification that was provided
Identity	The development of self, social relationships, capacity to make choices or awareness of opportunity
Outcomes	The resulting wealth creation and employment activities, personal activities, community activities or global activities

A Microsoft Access™ database was created to manage the information. This was linked to a Microsoft Excel™ spreadsheet which was used to create charts and pivot tables for presentation purposes and to perform statistical analysis such as chi-squared tests.

## Findings

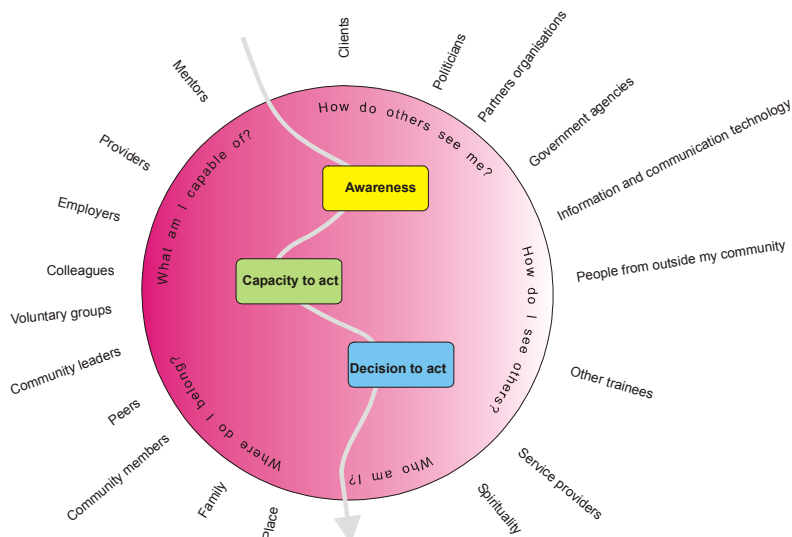
Respondents cited 114 unique programs that were considered to be effective (some respondents offered more than one program and some programs were referred to several times). From these programs 1015 references were identified that indicated an aspect of the program that made it effective. Figure 2, below, shows how respondents perceived the key ingredients that contributed to effective VET programs. Delivery aspects were considered most important with 24 per cent of all responses including a delivery aspect. These aspects of delivery included such things as the content, the quality of the trainer, the quality of the qualification obtained and the foundational processes such as planning, coordination, and evaluation of programs.

**Figure 2. How respondents perceived key ingredients of effective training programs (n=1015, multiple responses allowed)**



Perhaps surprising, however, was the finding that the second most significant factor contributing to effectiveness, was identity formation. This then led to a more detailed examination of the data to determine what about identity formation was significant. The data clearly pointed to three phases of identity formation: a process of awareness raising, an increasing capacity to take action and then a decision to act. The result of this process, if followed through, was an emerging formation of a positive identity. Of significance for the discussion of social capital, as shown in Figure 1, was the further finding that this process was always accompanied by interactions with other individuals or organisations. Figure 3 attempts to explain this process, and shows some of the many interactions that are likely to take place as the learning process continues. There are other interactions that do of course occur, particularly in terms of the learner and the training content. These are taken as a given. However the diagram includes two non-human interactions that are of significance, particularly—though not exclusively—for Indigenous people. Interactions between place and a person or community’s spirituality form an important component of the process.

**Figure 3. The process of identity formation that occurs in learning in the context of social interactions.**



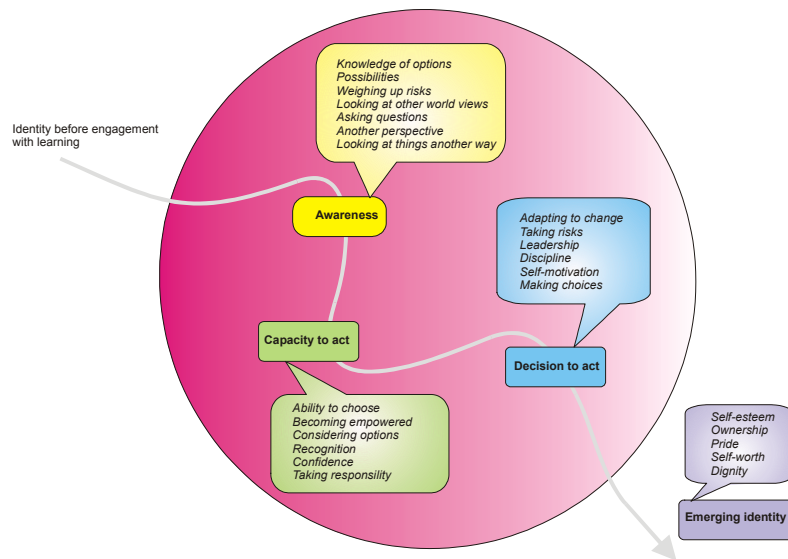
It is clear from the data that working through these phases in the context of these interactions, helps the learner answer the foundational questions of: ‘Who am I?’, ‘Where do I belong?’, ‘What am I capable of?’, ‘How do others see me?’ and ‘How do I see others?’. Many respondents commented on the importance of interactions outside learners’ immediate sphere of influence in shaping their identity. These external networks, or ‘links’ (Woolcock 1998) were seen to be critical in ‘broadening horizons’ or getting a different perspective. The training environment was described by some as a place where people from different backgrounds—sometimes from within the same community—came together and exchanged ideas. The external interactions were also often critical for enabling learners to recognise their capacity to act in the light of their developing skills. The decision to act, was often made in the context of interactions with people close to their sphere of social influence.

By way of example, the process could be illustrated in the following scenario. A young person, whose sphere of influence may be restricted to family and peers, is first of all exposed to a fresh awareness of his world as he is exposed to a learning environment built around structured workplace learning. Through his interactions with the training provider, work colleagues and employer, he becomes aware of career possibilities and options. As he progresses he realises his capacity to make choices for his own career. He becomes empowered to begin to realise some of his aspirations. He begins to exhibit self-confidence. Finally he makes a career choice and takes steps to make changes, which lead him into a career path. He does this being particularly conscious of the ongoing interactions he has with his peers, family and new networks. In short, before he engaged in the learning process he was ‘just a student’, at the end of this process ‘he is a competent tradesperson’. The result is a transformed identity.

Figure 4 attempts to show how respondents expressed the phases. While these phases are shown discretely, there is in fact a degree of overlap between them. However there was a tendency for the process to follow similar patterns. *Firstly*, exposure to learning helped trainees to become aware of their opportunities: ‘asking questions’, ‘seeing things from a different perspective’ and ‘broadening horizons’. *Secondly*, trainees began to realise they had a capacity to act: ‘having choice’, ‘considering options’, ‘taking responsibility’ and expressing ‘self confidence’. *Thirdly*, in the light of their new skills and knowledge, learners made decisions to act: ‘making choices’, ‘taking leadership responsibilities’, ‘becoming self disciplined’, and ‘adapting to change’. While these decisions were most often related to employment, they were also often related to community, family or individual outcomes.

The consequence of following through this process was an emerging identity. This was frequently expressed as ‘self esteem’, ‘self worth’, and ‘pride’. At a community level it was often described in terms of ‘ownership’.

**Figure 4. How phases of identity formation through learning are expressed**



## Implications and conclusions

While this paper has given a very brief overview of the findings of one aspect of my research, it attempts to show the significance of identity formation for learning. It also shows—in the light of the model shown in Figure 1—how this relates to the interactions that occur during the process of learning and therefore how this feeds into a model of social capital.

The findings suggest that identity formation is a key part of the learning process. While some research has tried to quantify elements of identity, sometimes described in terms of employability or soft skills, and place them in a competency based framework, these findings suggest that identity formation stands outside the standard elements of competency that are used for assessment of accredited training.

However, while suggesting that the elements of identity formation should not be included in standard assessment processes, the findings *do* suggest that training design must include opportunities for identity formation to be effective. One implication of this is particularly significant for training in Indigenous communities where training is sometimes said to raise false hopes of employment. If the training does not empower learners to make choices (either because the choices don't exist or because the choices are not related to the needs of the individual) then the process of identity formation will be negative. The questions of 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong' are not answered by the training and are left to be answered by other influences.

A further significant implication relates to the interactions that occur. The most effective models of training described by respondents included interaction with people outside the person's immediate sphere of influence. If training does not include those external interactions the learner's worldview will not be expanded and therefore his or her capacity to contribute to the social capacity of the community will be stunted. In an Indigenous context, for training that happens 'on community', it is important to ensure therefore, that a range of external interactions are facilitated by the training.

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