Adult Learners and the Identities They Tell: Pedagogic Spaces for Inviting New Tales

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract: Adult learners often tell and retell their stories of learning. These previous experiences, encounters, and histories of learning are significant in the construction of adult learners' identities, biographies, and relationships to learning. Narrative perspectives of identity invite adult educators in considering how their educative practices enable adult learners in further 'storying' themselves as active participants in learning, both within the lifeplace and workplace.

"The stories we tell about our lives are not necessarily those lives as they were lived, but these stories become our experiences of those lives….Stories are true to the flux of experience, and the story affects the direction of that flux" (Frank 1995, p. 22).

Introduction

Adult learners often tell and re-tell stories about learning. These stories are usually comprised of adults' previous experiences of learning. These previous experiences, in turn, contribute to the current telling of stories told about working, learning, and living. These current tellings contour the potential horizons and trajectories for individuals' working lives, and "learning careers" (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000). The stories of learning that are continually told and re-told by individuals contributes to the development of learner identities – or the multiple ways in which adult learners see themselves in the world and how they interpret their participation and engagement with learning in the workplace and "lifeplace" (Davis 2005).

However, some stories that adult learners tell about themselves may not accurately portray their skills, experiences, and abilities. Some version of identities that adult learners construct may become dominant and more visible than others, resulting in learners not noticing (or valuing) alternative tellings and possibilities of seeing their strengths and dispositions to learning. As Frank's (1995) quote above suggests, some stories of learning that workers narrate about themselves may not necessarily reflect their capacities and potential, but rather be influenced by the flux of adult learners' experiences of learning. As Sharkey (2004) demonstrates, the stories that individuals self-censor and do not tell within autobiographic work can be just as powerful determinants in identity construction as those they do tell. Yet, the stories adult learners tell about themselves can shape and direct how they construct identities in relation to learning. Adult learners' perspectives and dispositions to formal learning may shape the contours of one's 'relationships' to formal learning.

Conceptualizing Learner Identities

"It is not unreasonable to conjecture that identities are crucial to learning … identities are likely to play a critical role in determining whether the process of learning will end with what counts as success or with what is regarded as failure" (Sfard and Prusak 2005, p. 19).

In focusing on learner identities it is important to outline the parameters of this concept, when taken from a narrative position. I work from a non-humanist position. A humanist perspective on identity understands the self to be fixed, stable, and unified, that the essence of an individual exists independently of social institutions, social structures, and discursive practices. Rather, I am influenced through poststructural notions suggesting identity, or subject positions, as being socially produced and constructed through language and in relation to other subjects and institutions (Davies 2004, St. Pierre 2000). Following this view, I am drawn to Weedon (1987) who writes that subjectivity arises through the "conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to her world" (p. 32). From a poststructural understanding of subjectivity, I further elaborate linkages to identity and subject formation using narrative perspectives (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, Dominice 2000, Kerby 1991). In his understanding of identity seen through the lens of narrative inquiry, Frank (1995) suggests that identity is a storied process whereby, "Stories do not describe the self; they are the self's medium of being" (p. 53). Or as McAdam's suggests, "The process of identity formation proceeds throughout adulthood and outcomes of the process – the created identity per se – is a dynamic, evolving life story (1985, p. 29).

For Giddens (1991) identity in late modernity is understood to be a "reflexive project of the self." This reflexive project involves the individual in developing their self-narrative within a context of ever shifting social experiences and interactions with social institutions. The identity project of subject formation is always emerging and sensitive to the experiences of the individual in their quest for narrative stability in uncertain times. Along these similar lines of thinking, Bauman (1992) understands identity as being a "task." This task for the individual is to consistently observe one's self. From this perspective, such observation should be given the highest priority. It is a task not to be abandoned for the individual must continually tell and re-tell, or tell anew who she is and how she sees herself as she progressively plots forwards, advancing through her lifecourse.

In further contributing to a narrative position on learner identities, Ricouer (1986) provides the very useful term of "narrative identity" so as to understand individuals as storied beings. For Ricouer the self only comes into being or is constructed when the individual's story is being told. It is through storytelling, or narration, that one's identity is created and maintained. If the self or subject were provided (or known) at the onset then the narrator would know who they already are. Thus, there would be nothing more to understand. The existential search would be complete. Therefore, storytelling is the medium through which self-presentation (or identity) is constructed and maintained. Kenyon and Randall (1997), through their work on emphasising adult learning through autobiographical reflection, build upon Ricouer's notions of "narrative identity" in maintaining that, "To be a person is to have a story. More than that, it is to be a story" (p. 1).

In the context of workplace learning, the contributions of Billet (2004) and Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2002), and Hodkinson et.al. (2004) have focused on the individual and the significance of learners' identity construction through learning in the workplace and one's lifecourse. For Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2002) and Hodkinson et. al. (2004) an interest in individual's "dispositions" and biography have been emphasised for further understanding workplace learning. Individuals' biographical dispositions contribute to workers' perceptions and intentions for engaging in opportunities for learning at work. Workers' identities are carried from previous working/learning experiences and directly impact upon future choices and actions in the workplace (Hodkinson et. al. 2004). As the authors note, "We need to understand much better

the reflexive ways in which people's lives are shaped, bounded or change direction as they engage with education, labour market and workplace organisations" (p. 8). However, in addressing individuals effected by wounding learning practices, not only does a current analysis of one's contemporary learning experiences need to occur, but an awareness of the worker's *previous* experiences of learning.

Billet (2004) has advanced notions of learner/worker identities as being significant to engaging in affordances for learning made possible within workplaces. In referring to learners, Billet and Pavlova (2005) discuss the notion of "agentic action" or how individuals create personal goals in aspiring towards learning in and through work. This notion of agency is linked to learners' identities and subjectivities. Through their emphasis on individual's capacities for learning throughout one's career, Billet and Pavlova (2005) write that, "A key element of agentic action is how it shapes individual's decision making in and for their working lives, including how they engage in the demanding processes of extending their knowledge throughout their working lives" (p.200). Building from this premise I propose that a worker's agentic action for engaging in affordances of workplace learning are shaped, in varied capacities, from previous experiences and stories of learning that workers 'story' about themselves. This sense of being 'storied' is through the narrative construction of identity: the stories learners tell to themselves and to others.

Concerning the learner; identity is integral. Working from a narrative perspective, the learner affected through wounding learning practices continues to narrate these previous painful experiences from formal schooling, thus, constructing one's identity in relation to participation in learning later in life, predominantly within workplaces. The 'wounds', or the internalized experiences of learning, become storied threads which work towards weaving how the individual sees oneself. Often, these stories become the binding themes for individuals, limiting self-actualization. New, more engaging and positive experiences with learning must be experienced in order for the learner to begin to tell a different kind of story; to narrate a different sense of identity. As Lave and Wenger (1991) state, "Learning…implies becoming a different person [and] involves the construction of identity" (p.53).

Actual and Designated Identities

In attempting to operationalize a working definition of identity within the fields of education, Sfard and Prusak (2005) articulate a difference between "actual identity" and "designated identity" (p. 18). Actual identity is composed of stories that assist in narrating the present, but which arise from one's past. Actual identity stories are told in the present tense and hold a form of 'truth' for the individual. Comments students make such as "I can't learn this" or "I am not going to be able to complete that" indicate the workings of actual identity. In the context of learning, a worker's actual identity to learning is shaped through their previous experiences. So when a worker says or thinks to themselves "I won't be able to that, so I think I should just quit now", they are drawing upon previous experiences that shape their current 'telling' – or how they currently see and value their self and their ability, or inability, to fulfil their participation in learning or work.

Designated identities are the identity stories one tells in a future tense. These are stories told about what a worker expects is possible or achievable for them. Designated identities are stories helping to shape the trajectory of the individual. In the learning context, these are stories shaping what the workers think they are capable of achieving or performing. Designated identity stories shape the kinds of occupational identities workers might imagine and the types of occupational communities they might belong within. These stories influence vocational

pathways by accepting or limiting what one's capacity to learn and do is. Both actual and designated identities are inextricably linked. The actual identity, or current telling and re-telling of their stories of learning, directly contributes to the shaping of stories a worker tells and retells when contemplating her future. In other words, for a learner, her current experiences and how these experiences are storied, shapes her current outlook and her sense of self. In turn, this forms the boundaries of what kind of future she anticipates. If her

relationship to learning is storied as a negative or traumatic experience within her actual identity, most likely it will be replicated within her designated identity as well (See Diagram 1).
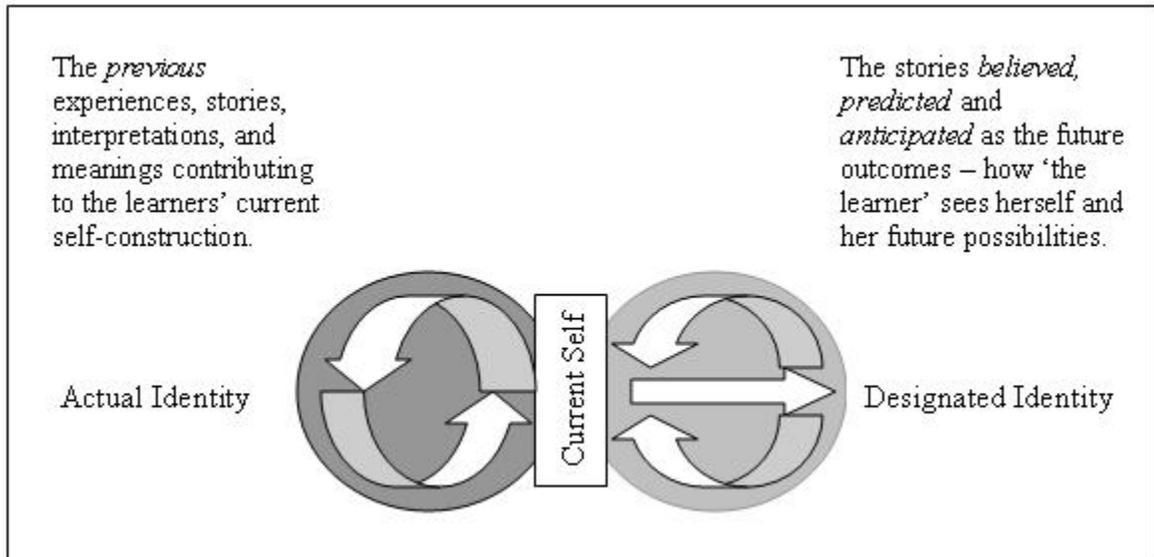

Diagram 1: Working model of actual and designated identities (based on Sfard and Prusak 2005)

With this attention towards learners' identities and how their identities are shaped via their *experiences* of learning, my pedagogies have been shaped to "scaffold" (Vygotsky 1978) participant's awareness to emerging perspectives of learning (Hager 2004a, Billet 2004, Gherardi 2001); to actively work in creating positive and engaging experiences around learning and work (Fuller and Unwin 2002); and, the intention to help students narrate new stories in relation to their capacities for learning in order to tell new stories regarding their designated identities. As Stephen Brookfield (1990) discusses in overcoming students' resistance to learning, the educator needs to understand the seeds of the student's recalcitrance and then work with the student from that emotive source to help overcome their resistance or anxieties to participating in learning. The heart of this defiance typically resides around a low self-image, or poor and unfulfilling relationships with formalised learning. Working with the actual and designated identities of learners in mind, in conjunction with, creating a sense of excitement in learning (Claesson 2005, hooks 1994), learners who have experienced wounding learning practices *can* and *do* recover to tell new and inspiring stories about themselves and their capacities for participation in learning.

Borrowing from Bourdieu's concept of habitus as personalised dispositions for interacting in the world, there is strong lineage between learners' past and present experiences. He writes:

"The habitus acquired in the family is at the basis of the structuring of school experiences…; the habitus transformed by the action of the school, itself diversified, is in

turn at the basis of all subsequent experiences…and so on, from restructuring to restructuring" (Bourdieu, 1972, cited in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 134).

The notion of habitus can become a useful tool in understanding how actual and designated identities may be enacted through the fields of life and work that individuals move through. Through committing with learners to creating new learning opportunities and experiences helping to reshape or open up possibilities for one's designated identity, new futures may be imagined. This is of most importance for if the damaged relationship to learning is not overcome and new identities or relationships established, then the individual's relationships and identities to formal learning and training programs may remain storied as being disengaged or resistant. Thus impacting the range of possibilities the learner may envision for their life and work, while affirming less desirable and limiting opportunities. As Reay (2004) affirms, "… the most improbable practices are rejected as unthinkable, but concomitantly, only a range of practices are possible" (p. 433).

Conclusion

A narrative perspective of identity has been offered inviting adult educators to reflect on the biographies and identities adult learners may construct in relation to their participation in formal learning programs. This attention to adult learners' identities and the relationships they construct with formal learning can contribute in both curriculum development and pedagogic practices, in particular, when deployed as a strategy for reengaging adult learners in formal learning environments and training and development initiatives, who often 'story' themselves as unable to participate or are reluctant and resistant to participation.

What then, might effective and purposeful pedagogies be for adult learners when narrative perspectives of identity are emphasised by educators? What then do these pedagogies look like and in what ways are they embodied by educators? How are learners invited to draw upon and reflect on their own identity constructions within the contexts of formalised training programs? What kinds of environments are necessary within formal training programs to support an emphasis on learners' stories? What are the effects of this for learners, educators, institutions, and workplaces?

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