Learning and identity in literacy programs

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Abstract: This paper argues that identity is only relatively stable and is created and re-created in interactions between the individual and the social world that they inhabit and that learning is developed through social relationships. Through a study of adult literacy learners, it shows that people are not passive but they are constrained by the socio-cultural structures within which they act. It demonstrates that negative experiences of schooling impact on learning identities but participating in programs where students' abilities and achievements are recognised by both their peers and tutors is crucial in changing negative views of their competence as learners.

Introduction

This paper explores the factors that impact on the learning identity of participants in literacy programs. It focuses on the ways in which an individual's identity has an effect on their learning and *vice versa*. In particular it shows the importance of having an identity as someone who sees oneself, and is seen by significant others, as a competent learner and the pedagogical approaches that can encourage these changes.

Learning and Identity

The theoretical perspective taken in this paper is that identity is only relatively stable and is created and re-created in interactions between the individual and the social world that they inhabit (Bauman, 1996; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Learning has a strong relationship to identity because, through the institutions of the family, education and work, the individual's outlook and self-image are socially shaped so that 'fundamental to our understanding of learning…is the whole person in a social situation' (Jarvis, 2009, p 31). Viewing learning and identity as developing through social relationships and within particular contexts or 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) also deals with issues of power because it addresses 'the mechanisms through which the collective and the common enter individual activities…through learning (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p 15). Learning identities, however, tend to act as self-fulfilling prophecies, and so 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. In addition, identity is experienced through the competences manifested in sharing a common enterprise, values, assumptions, purpose and communication through work and life which means that 'we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable; we know who we are not by what is foreign, opaque, unwieldy, unproductive' (Wenger, 1998, p 153). Identity in this sense is not fixed because people are also defined in terms of their non-participation in practices as well as in the movement between or within them. People also bring a set of conceptions, procedures, beliefs, and dispositions to their lives so learning is shaped by the diverse ways in which individuals elect to engage in activities and these in turn are 'mediated by individuals' subjectivities' (Billett, 2006, p 2).

In modern times constant change results in the pervasive fluidity of social memberships and of identities themselves in ways that often lead to fear and insecurity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Therefore the role of learning in shaping identities may be greater now than in the past since learning can be the primary means of creating a new self because what is potentially possible is only limited by our imaginations. So engaging in learning can be the means of making a reality of our desire to be, for example, a great chef and thus close the critical gap between our actual and designated identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p 19). Learning is therefore not only about acquiring new skills and practices but is also about changes in people's identity.

Identity as a competent learner is shaped by the complex interaction of past learning experiences and the mediating effect of family influences upon them (Rees, Gorard, Fevre, & Furlong, 2000), as well as the norms and values of the social networks to which individuals belong (Gallacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002; McGivney, 2001). So identities feed into, and are fed by, learning experiences. Researchers (e.g. Tett & Maclachlan, 2007; Wojecki, 2007) argue that engaging in learning in adulthood can have a significant role in the formation and re-formation of the identities of participants and consequently of their ability to reach their learning goals. However, a person's activities and choices are both constrained and enabled by their horizons for action and this has a major impact on the decision to engage in learning. People bring a particular life history, which influences how they engage with learning through the ways it shapes their expectations, hopes, and aspirations. In particular poor experiences of learning at school can have a strong negative effect on a decision to participate in education as an adult because, as Jonker (2005, p 123), argues:

> at the individual level, schooling can offer the confidence of becoming an educated, knowledgeable person. It can also saddle one for life with the feeling that one is doomed to fail. Schooling, in other words, is part of the complex process of shaping and reshaping the self.

This negative identity in relation to learning is particularly common in people who have difficulties with literacy because people tend to internalise a deficit discourse and assume that earlier experiences of 'failure' to learn are solely their responsibility. Since individuals play an active role in constructing meaning from the discourses they encounter this suggests that learning designed to bring about change should focus both on the individual's sense of self and identity and also on how these are shaped by, and shape, their agency.

Research design

The research reported on was designed to answer two main research questions: what was the impact of earlier negative educational experiences on literacy students' views of themselves as learners and what factors in literacy programs contribute to a changed learner identity? Eight case study organizations were selected using four main criteria: that they were located in urban areas where social and economic deprivation was most concentrated; that they used different types of provision (i.e. dedicated, embedded and holistic); that they worked with at least eight students; and that they targeted 'at risk' students, comprising those who had chaotic life styles, those who were working through social or vocational transitions, those for whom attaining their learning goals was problematic. The students were an opportunistic sample comprising those that were willing and able to be interviewed from the program and who were broadly

representative in terms of the age, 'race' and gender profile of the participating group. Students' ages ranged from the early twenties to late fifties; there was a slight gender imbalance in favour of males and time spent in the program ranged from six weeks to one year with the median being six months. Students were interviewed near the beginning and the end of their courses. Students were asked to talk about: their individual life histories including key life events; the influence of key support/learning organizations on their lives; the circumstances in which they were currently situated and their imagined futures. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Using an open coding scheme (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), these interview data were first sorted chronologically to construct linear learning histories. Working then from the histories, emergent analytic topics became evident. Next, the data were coded by these themes and a secondary analysis was completed and independently checked by two researchers. The categories that emerged from this process were the impact of early school experiences, later traumas, the impact of experiences of marginalisation on students' willingness to engage in literacy programs and the affect of participation on their learning identities.

Findings

Many of the students described negative experiences of initial education that had caused them to be reluctant to engage in structured, or 'learning-conscious' learning (Rogers, 2003, p 27). Rogers distinguishes the everyday learning that we engage in through living and acting in the world around us from acquisitional or 'task-conscious' learning (p. 16). He maintains, however, that many adults with negative experiences of compulsory education struggle to marry their construction of themselves as capable 'task-conscious' learners with their sense of self as learners in structured educational contexts. Although adults may recognise their competence in relation to the acquisitional learning that they regularly encounter such as caring for children or elders, their perceptions and experience of education inhibit the transfer of this positive self-construct in formalised learning contexts. They can therefore revert to constructing themselves as *not* competent, because they equate learning primarily with formal education. This means that they have negative or, at best, fragile identities as learners.

When students reflected back on how they felt at the start of their courses, they said they had been reluctant to engage in any kind of learning. For example, one participant said 'school days are bad memories, and it puts you off learning because it makes you feel such a failure, and you don't want that again' (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther, and Edwards, 2008, p 33). Another spoke about the teachers being:

> more interested in the bright ones, the ones that could get on...They sort of just left me to one side… I tried to do my best, but I just felt that because I wasn't bright and I wasn't brainy that people just didn't want to know (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther, and Edwards, 2008, p 32).

The discourse that people internalised was that they were 'thick', 'stupid' and 'not very bright' human beings and this led them to hide their literacy difficulties. Many recalled memories of bullying and harassment that affected their ability to learn because they felt unsafe. For example, a student's memories of his learning at school were shaped by his experiences of bullying from his teachers. He said, 'In English and Math classes if you got picked on by the teacher...and when you got it wrong - you got hit. So there was fear - no one would put up their

hand unless you were 100% sure, and that marks you' (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther, and Edwards, 2008, p 33).

However, this research showed that participating in programs where students' abilities and achievements were recognised by both their peers and tutors was crucial in changing these negative views of their competence as learners. As one student suggested:

> Coming here helps me keep on going. I don't think I'm a failure any more…. It's making me feel good doing something I wanted to do for myself. … It's boosting my self-esteem, giving me more confidence and helping me know I can get a job (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther, and Edwards, 2008, p 56)

Tutors also offered the students they worked with trust and respect by responding positively to their ideas about what they wanted to learn. For example, 'the tutors here offer me lots of choice and help me to move on to the next thing when I'm ready' (Maclachlan et al, 2008: 50). Peer support also built a positive learner identity especially when: 'the whole group gets on well together and it gives me support to try things that I find difficult such as writing and spelling on the chart' (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther, and Edwards, 2008, p 51). A final aspect of the way in which participating in these programs contributed to a new sense of being a person that was capable of learning was positive tutor- student relationships. For example:

> It motivates me that the tutors are working so hard to help me. I've already been able to write a letter and had a good result from it. I feel it's the first time anyone's reacted to anything I've said (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther, and Edwards, 2008, p 58).

This quote illustrates that although the individual student can affect his/her own confidence in learning, tutors and peers can help increase this by providing support, encouragement and constructive feedback especially when the learning results in positive change. As Beth Crossan and her colleagues have argued, seeing oneself as a competent learner is the product of the complex interplay between the 'social and economic structures that shape people's lives, the educational institutions which determine the processes of engagement with learning, and the learners themselves' (Crossan, Field, Gallacher, and Merrill, 2003, p 58). All education represents the practical articulation of a particular set of values, be they implicit or explicit. The data from this research show that where students are assisted in actively and critically making informed choices about their lives and their learning then changes in learning identity can follow. For example many participants commented on the value of working together and the value of peer support in helping them to make progress.

> The ... class shows you a good way to put things across, and you don't feel out of place. You're in with the group so you get involved. When there's 3 or 4 of us together in the group, you have to work out tasks, you're communicating with each other and it's very satisfying (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther, and Edwards, 2008, p 60)

Participants in these projects had changed their dispositions to learning partly because of these positive tutor-learner relationships that could and were transforming the learners' identities. They had done this in part by changing 'the relationship between a learner's personal identity, his or her material and cultural surroundings and dispositions to learning' (Hodkinson &

Bloomer 2002, p 38). The impact of the interaction with the tutor and other students had a significant impact on the social process of identity formation because it was sensitive to biographical narratives and cultural influences (Schuller et al, 2004). For example:

> I'm more calm now and seeing different aspects of myself as well. … I used to be 'loud and proud' when I first started the course, but now I'm quieter and let other people talk. What I used to think and what I think now are two different things (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther, and Edwards, 2008: 61)

A final feature of the programs that impacted on learner identity was being placed at the centre of social networks that regard learning as valuable and productive. This led to changes in participants' sense of their potential, ability and achievements and a growing realisation that they were not as 'thick' as they had seen themselves, and been seen, in the past. For example: 'in this place you're not just a disabled person here. You're respected as an ordinary person, as a human being (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther, and Edwards, 2008, p 62).

Conclusion

People are not passive but they are constrained by the socio-cultural structures within which they act. This means that engaging in meaningful learning activities that are developed through shared social relationships will be limited both by the individual's internalised conceptions of their identity as a learner and by the learning affordances (Billett, 2001) offered in their educational, working and social lives. In this study seeing oneself, and being seen by others, as a person who has an identity as a competent learner was the product of the interaction between the individual's own personal history and the social context in which the learning took place. From the different contexts of these adult literacy students it appears that although identities are assigned by powerful others, people can also create their own sense of self despite these constructions. Individuals were able to assert their agency through the adoption and adaptation of different forms of participation and identity construction within different communities. Engaging in new practices and experiencing new perspectives through learning brought an awareness of how participants saw themselves and how others saw them and so opened up the possibility of positive change. A key aspect of this was the gaining of reciprocal and mutual recognition of each other's skills, knowledge and understanding that led to a stronger identity as a competent learner. Experiencing supportive relationships between tutors and students and amongst peers, especially where expertise and support were offered within reciprocal relationships through exchanges of skills and knowledge, was crucial in promoting this change. Such an approach was more likely to lead to increasing competence and confidence in learning because people were regarded as knowledge-rich and thus able to contribute, rather than being seen as suffering from a skills-deficit.

This research has implications for practice because it shows that receiving respect and recognition from significant others about who we are and what we can do makes a contribution to our ability to see ourselves as competent learners and so our learning identity can change. A key aspect of this involves providing an environment in which students can thrive through a pedagogical approach that places participants' own goals at the centre of the learning activities and creates a supportive atmosphere where they were treated with respect within relationships of trust. Building on and extending the knowledge and skills that adults have, based on their desires

and interests, is vital if they are not to have their already fragile confidence dented. This means that approaches that enable people to 're-author their identities to learning' (Wojecki, 2007 p 171) through the positive pedagogical approaches that we have outlined, are the most efficacious. The findings also have implications for theory because they demonstrate that a social, rather than an individual, theory of learning is more robust in explaining changing learning identities. The paper has also demonstrated that literacy is socially constructed, socially embedded and context dependent, rather than neutral and context free.

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