

What role can PDP play in identity development and confidence building in non-traditional students?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the development of a positive learning identity in students, within the context of communities of practice. It considers the role of Personal Development Planning (PDP) in building confidence in inexperienced learners through its use as a tool for transition, engagement and achievement, and its emphasis on learning communities and peer support. It is illustrated by a case study of FdA Early Years Care and Education students, who have been using the Professional Development Unit (PDU), an online accredited unit developed by the CETL Foundation Direct as a version of PDP for work-based learners. The paper concludes that three aspects of the PDU act together as a forum for the exchange and development of ideas, and in doing so support the growth of learning communities that work to affirm the individual. Guided and structured reflection, beginning with a Benchmark Statement and ending with a 360-degree review, is used as a means for aspiration building, and for marking the distance travelled. Social mechanisms are put in place via the discussion boards of the university VLE for confidence building through identification with a valued group and the use of peers as a learning resource. Finally, the fluid boundaries between the workplace and the university, represented as three overlapping circles of self, theory and practice, allow for integrated learning and the introduction of the familiar into the unfamiliar. The PDU is therefore demonstrated here to be a safe area of the curriculum that supports the development and confidence of the new uncertain learner.

Key words: widening participation; community; peer support; identity; confidence; reflection.

Introduction

The government policy of widening participation (WP) has at its heart a greater accessibility of higher education (HE) to 'a new constituency of learners' (MacDonald and Stratta, 2001, p.250), through the promotion of 'successful participation in HE to everyone who can benefit from it' (HEFCE, 2009, p.18). Often defined by what they are not, this constituency of 'non-traditional' students instead encompasses a diverse cross-section of society, increasingly challenging the hegemony of the more common school leaver (HESA, 2010) through the on-going WP agenda (HEFCE, 2009). The absorption of these students represents a change in university culture, with those who were once a minority group gradually becoming the norm. However, the emphasis remains on their enrolment in higher education, rather than on their learning needs once they are there. This situation is illustrated by a recent study (MacDonald and Stratta, 2001) indicating that lecturers and teaching staff tend to resist the classification of non-standard students as a group according to their prior educational experiences or social context. While this is argued to maintain a form of equality of treatment for all students, regardless of background, it overlooks the differences that can impact upon the student experience. For older people, often in full time employment, frequently with family commitments and unused to the academic demands of formal education, accessing a programme of study is only the first barrier to overcome. Without a sense of legitimacy as a student and the feeling of belonging inherent as a valued member of the university community, engagement and subsequent achievement can suffer (Kember et al., 2001). By resisting the pedagogical and institutional change required, teaching staff can therefore inadvertently render these students invisible (Bamber and Tett, 2000).

'Identity' can be understood as the way in which individuals perceive and understand themselves. As such it is a personal construct, but can also be contextualised within a social structure. Consequently, as people move through different social groups, the way they understand themselves and the behaviour that entails will change according to the situation (Stets and Burke, 2000). This is closely linked to feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and is known to be more successful when an individual's sense of identity in each situation is tied to social relationships (Hogg et al., 1995). Taking these ideas into the classroom would help new students to connect to their peers and adapt faster to their status as a student. This process has been mediated through personal development

planning (PDP), as exemplified by the Professional Development Unit (PDU) developed by the CETL Foundation Direct, and used by FdA Early Years Care and Education (FdA EYCE). Its three principle aspects of reflection, community and integration together provide a safe area of the curriculum for the new student to engage, develop and achieve. The key measure is how far students are able to appreciate the overlap between each of the three areas and their contribution to each other. This will be investigated through student reviews and reflections, conducted as part of the requirements of the PDU. By reporting on their confidence and sense of community, students may help to indicate their integration onto the course and subsequent understanding and acceptance of themselves as a learner.

Becoming a student

Widening participation has redefined the student, discursively opening up the term to a broad range of constructions. Nevertheless, the prominence given to the idea of the independent learner is one which can be inappropriate for most of those students drawn in by the net of broader access (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Learning, if it is to be successful, must recognise the contribution of all facets of the individual's life out of the classroom, and their impact on what happens in the classroom (Bamber and Tett, 2000). Particularly for those students who do not have recent experience of education, or who perhaps might have had negative experiences, the acknowledgement of the broader context of their lives is a way to successfully embed learning, valuing all that they bring with them (Appleby and Bathmaker, 2006). Learning is contextual, encompassing the context in which learning takes place and the context in which a person becomes a learner by adopting a student identity (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007). However, this context may also be characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty, since many new students are faced with the challenging of assumptions that have previously gone unquestioned (Bamber and Tett, 2000). Helping students to integrate effectively is not merely a matter of establishing the opportunity to study; the social and personal complexities of becoming and being a learner – particularly a part-time learner, as experienced by the FdA EYCE students here – must also be taken into account (Castles, 2004).

These ideas are illustrated well by the students' Benchmark Statements; their first piece of work for the degree:

I am a registered childminder and also a mother. Both of these roles play an important part of my life. I first got into childcare as I have children of my own.

I only started my current job in a pre-school in February 2008 and have decided to go head first into developing my limited knowledge of the early years. The skills I do have come from doing the job, not from formal education, as I have no qualifications in childcare.

I have worked within the field of childcare for 23 years and have seen many developments in practice and approaches to the needs of children 0-5 years. I am keen to develop this knowledge by having the opportunity to reflect on my own and others' practice, but most of all to be within an environment where I can relate the theory to my practice.

I am anxious to learn about the social implications and theories regarding children's learning as I have first hand exposure to many deprived economic and social environments through my travels and home in South Africa.

By focusing on the individual, but also taking into account their social context, the PDU helps students understand themselves by providing a place to explore their commitments, values and goals, and the consistency and coherence between beliefs, choices and actions (Adams and Marshall, 1996). For the new student, entry into a university-based social group is the first step in the development of a salient 'learner' identity. By interacting with others as students, each individual gains the opportunity to adopt the practices and values of a learner through membership of the group, and in doing so take on a new perspective of themselves in light of these emergent social relations. , However, the process can be complex and potentially fraught with anxiety, as the discontinuities entailed in a move into HE can threaten the new student's sense of self and actively prevent recognition of the self as a learner (Johnson and Robson, 1999). To overcome this, the learning environment is an important factor in its provision for the sharing of experience, learning from peers, and accessing support when needed (Fagerberg and Kihlgren, 2001). As one student expressed it, 'a community of learning, to me, is what going to university is all about; we have our own little community within the classroom, all different people from different backgrounds, learning off each other'.

The Professional Development Unit

One solution proposed here is the creation and maintenance of a micro-context in which this integration can be guided and managed on an institutional level, but supported by student learning communities. The online Professional Development Unit (PDU) was developed specifically for Foundation degree students, with these needs and problems in mind. It is an accredited unit delivered via the university VLE but integrated into the curriculum, and runs throughout the entire degree, with students earning 20 credits for each of the three part-time years. As work-based, part time, mature learners, the foundation degree students discussed here do not fit into the standard undergraduate model as they have often extensive knowledge of workplace practice and proficiency to bring into the classroom and apply to the learning situation. Nevertheless, they share the goal of university education to develop as independent learners through active teaching that harnesses all senses and media (Cottrell, 2008). The students enrolled on the FdA EYCE, typically women aged between 30-45 years (within a range of 18-55 years), would benefit from a learner-centred approach at the heart of a supportive environment which respects and draws upon the skills and knowledge acquired in the workplace and the home (Herman and Kirkup, 2008). The PDU is a site for the integration of work, study and personal life within a community of supportive peers, thus enabling the emergence of a learning identity. As a scaffold for the self, it provides a rationale for the linking of learning activities to personal growth and transformation.

The PDU has its origins in the Progress Files recommended by the Dearing report in 1997 (NCIHE, 1997) and formally introduced by the QAA four years later (QAA, 2001). As well as a transcript of marks, the report envisaged a role for formalised reflection, review and planning, helping students – and by extension those who teach them – to ‘improve links between formal and informal learning and...value what they can do as well as what they know’ (NCIHE, 1997, para. 9.47). PDP has suffered since its introduction from a lack of firm definition (Buckley, 2008), with a multiplicity of meanings to encompass enabling critical reflection, promoting independent learning, developing employability skills, and increasing student awareness of how and why they are learning (Clegg, 2004). Within this, PDP can be delivered through specific skills modules, the personal tutor system, portfolio-based organisation or embedding within the course, amongst others, adding to the differences in interpretation, understanding and implementation (Clegg and Bradley,

2006). However, its status as an amorphous concept nevertheless makes it readily adaptable to circumstances. It is therefore configured here as a holistic process, designed to facilitate and ease the transition into higher education by harnessing these ideas around identity development and using them in the classroom.

The unit acts as a forum for the exchange and development of ideas in three areas: within the self; with peers and colleagues; and between the workplace, university and home. This is achieved through individual activities and tasks, and by making full use of the VLE's discussion boards. Each area is located within an overarching discursive framework that promotes reflection, thereby supporting autonomy by focussing the curriculum on the student and their learning and, indeed, recognising the individual as a student. To accomplish this, the PDU begins with a Benchmark Statement within the first three weeks of the first term. It is modelled on Barnett and Coate's (2005) conceptualisation of curricula, based in turn on the three domains of learning: self, theory and practice. In doing so, it actively and explicitly embraces all the knowledge a new student brings to the course, whether tacit, formal, experiential or practical, and validates who they are, what they have done, and their presence on the degree. The fluid boundaries engendered through the use of this diagram (Figure 1) allow for the movement of knowledge and expertise between the workplace and university, giving access to the familiar in the midst of that which is new and uncertain, and reinforcing the application of theory to practice.

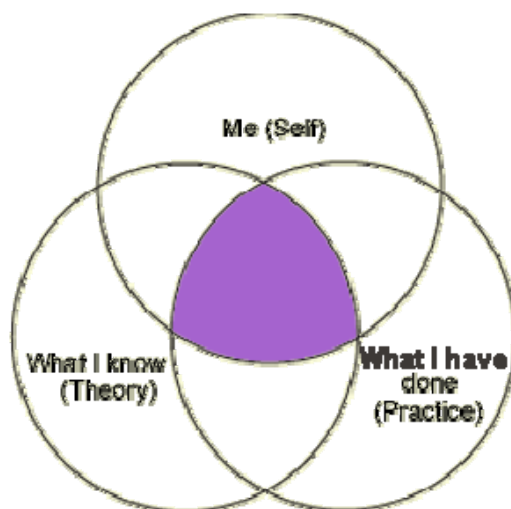


Figure 1. The three circles model of self, theory and practice (adapted from Barnett and Coate, 2005).

The benchmark takes a pragmatic approach, in that students are asked to consider each of the three areas in turn and how they contribute to the learning to be done and the goals involved in completion of the FdA EYCE. They are guided in the writing of their benchmark, which is structured around the mapping of their existing approach to practice against job-specific professional standards, their existing knowledge against the subjects to be covered over the degree, and their personal values and aspirations. Through this, and the opportunity it affords to set out the path that initially led the student onto the FdA EYCE and where they hope it will take them, they are helped to think about how their practice and their knowledge impacts upon, and is impacted by, their ideals and beliefs. In this way, they do not begin the degree as a blank canvas, since the benchmark draws attention to existing knowledge and prior experience. As valuable as this process is, the PDU deepens it further by adding a reflexive component. The Benchmark Statement comes to act, through an ongoing cycle of reflection and review at various points in the PDU, as a marker of the distance travelled. In its role as a starting point, students are able to see how far they have come in terms of academic ability and overall goals:

I am a Nursery Nurse. I have gained some knowledge and experience in working with all ages from 3 months to 5 years. I already have a BTEC in Early Years, and would like to extend my knowledge and improve my skills as an Early Years Practitioner. Since starting the degree I have already gained confidence and knowledge, due to working alongside a very supportive team. I hope I will achieve my goal of becoming a Proprietor of a successful Pre-school.

I am an Early Years Assistant in a reception class. I enrolled on the course to develop my knowledge of early years and improve my skills in the workplace. On a personal level I am hoping to improve my academic skills as it has been a while since I last studied. I would also like to become more confident in my ability to clearly express my thought and ideas. The future could involve a teaching career.

I have been a Pre-school Leader for three years. I have always wanted more, but didn't know what, and am hoping the FdA will fill the void in my life. I have enjoyed meeting lots of people all in similar shoes to me. I hope that the FdA makes me a more confident person who is able to stand up to confrontational people. I would use the acquired knowledge to bring about positive changes, for example to make a more pleasant environment for children and staff.

All FdA EYCE students from all three years were asked, via a short questionnaire, to name the aspect of the PDU they liked the most (a response rate of approximately 80% resulted in a dataset of 63 students). Reflection was highlighted by these students as a specific, named activity within the PDU, through its end of year reviews based on the three circles model, and its emphasis throughout on the importance of reflection in learning to integrate workplace practice and university study. The status of reflection as an activity of increasing merit and use seems apparent in the answers given, with 82% of all third years singling out reflection as their preferred element of the PDU, in comparison to just 21% of first years. Whereas the first year students commented that reflection was a useful way of letting off tensions by writing about opinions and feelings, by the third year this had moderated to an appreciation of its contribution to self-awareness and subsequent benefits to practice. It seems that the importance and usefulness of reflection is increasingly recognised and appreciated by FdA EYCE students as they progress through their degree. Moreover, the reflective process, beginning with the Benchmark Statement, is a tool for aspiration and confidence building. By placing the learner and their prior experience within the context of the course aims and outcomes, and linking them to practice, they are established as valid members of the university.

Building a learning community

The benchmark process helps students to articulate their reasons for being on the course and, as such, prepares them for becoming part of a learning community. The PDU, through its delivery online and its structure around the three learning domains, is able to act as a common hub around which individuals can share and discuss ideas on course assignments, workplace practice and their experiences with each. It is the ideal location for peer support, using social mechanisms as a means for creating a sense of belonging and ameliorating feelings of difference. For women learners in particular, empowerment and confidence are major aspects of the learning experience (Morgan and Holly, 1994), and to be positioned within a supportive network can aid this. Communities of practice work best when they focus on the shared knowledge of participants, rather than a particular task to be completed (Kayler and Weller, 2007). For students unsure of their place in an academic environment, this has the added benefit of allowing them to express their work-based expertise and bring the familiar into an unfamiliar domain. By taking part in discussion,

participants are able to negotiate and construct meaning through mutual recognition of each other as a practitioner (Handley et al., 2006). Through membership of this community, they are able to explore shared and varying traits in their experience, challenge assumptions and define collective understandings (Guldberg and Pilkington, 2006). Learning therefore is intrinsically related to identity (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007):

I really enjoy working within a group. We have created our own mini dictionary of knowledge which everyone seems to be enjoying sharing; what and how they practice within their own settings. I find it beneficial as it widens my knowledge too.

For community involvement of this kind to lead to learning, it must be meaningful and valued (Tinto, 1997). The PDU contributes meaning and value through structured discussions, beginning with an assessed exercise during the first semester. The first of four related tasks asks students to think about four theoretical ideas or practice-based principles they have learnt since starting the course, to post them to their online discussion groups of around six people, and to contribute on at least one other posting. The second element focuses on how each new piece of learning has affected or may affect practice, with their discussion board postings including evidence from their line manager or mentor, and consideration of the issues raised. Finally, the personal sphere is addressed in terms of any changes to personal values, ambitions and goals, but this may be kept private. Those that have chosen to share often relate their feelings to an event at work, for example:

I think we sometimes make life so complicated for ourselves that simple ideas are not valued and get overlooked.

One thing I've learnt on this course is to stand back sometimes and get the whole picture, not what is just in front of my eyes.

I discuss reflection with colleagues, and some are now accepting it and others still struggle with the concept – some people need to be told what to do and others to be encouraged to think and reflect on their own.

Children are being pushed into meeting targets they are not ready to meet. I find myself looking at these children and ask myself: what's going on?

Each of these three tasks prepares the students for the syndicate activity by structuring reflection and discussion around each of the three domains of learning. The main aim of the assessment is for each group to negotiate and collaborate in producing a 'top ten' list of suggestions or findings that would benefit someone new joining the course. These tips might include resources, initiatives, methods relating to practice, and so on; there are no limitations posed (Lyons and Buckley, 2009).

Although producing these tips is a useful resource to feed back into the PDU, it is the process entailed in this assignment that is of most value, rather than the product. Being a legitimate member of a community involves taking part in the negotiations through which meaning is constructed (Moore, 2006), as conversation between practitioners contributes to and changes the situational understandings of practice and the workplace (Tillema and Orland-Barak, 2006). The PDU, with its emphasis on discussion and collaboration, attempts to bring that professional knowledge-sharing from the workplace into academia, and the results of this study indicate that students respond well to it. Just over half of all first year respondents on FdA EYCE reported that they found the discussion boards to be their favourite feature of the PDU, specifically for sharing views, learning about others' opinions and having the opportunity to put across their own thoughts. Participation in discourse therefore stimulates both learning and identity development, through the enrichment of student understanding and acceptance by peers (Kayler and Weller, 2007). This idea is exemplified by the finding that 82% of first years felt that there was a strong sense of community on their course, a number that rose to 97% for the second years. This year group identified the benefits of discussion boards as the possibilities for reflecting on practice with others and the use of peers as an additional learning resource. Interestingly, third year students, in marked contrast to previous years, express a specific preference for direct face-to-face discussion over asynchronous, online contact. In line with the theoretical ideas above, it is posited here that online-mediated discussions on the PDU are appropriate for forming groups and instigating relationships in a safe environment for first years, but by the time they have progressed to the third year, the community of peers has developed in such a way that direct conversation has become the more suitable medium.

The final element of the PDU, and the last piece of assessed work for students on FdA EYCE, is a 360° review, which aims to bring together the three aspects of self, theory and

practice. Each student is asked to hand a questionnaire to around twelve people, including their line manager, mentor, work colleagues, student colleagues and clients/customers/trainees (where appropriate), to gain feedback on their practice, knowledge and professionalism. The student, having completed a questionnaire themselves, analyses the feedback to compare their own perceptions of their performance with those of the people they have asked, providing an objective basis to an end-of-degree appraisal of their progress and development in the three domains of learning. Their final review indicates that this integration is often successful, as these excerpts demonstrate:

I have been able to see the progression within myself, developing from someone lacking in confidence, unsure whether she would complete the course, to someone who is now able to hold her head high and role model the knowledge and expertise that has been gained through this foundation degree. I am a better person for it and this will reflect in my practice, which in turn will feed through my staff, the children and the parents.

On a personal level I know the training I have undertaken has enabled me to grow in confidence in all aspects of my role as a practitioner and team leader. I have developed in-depth knowledge and understanding of early years. During my three years I have developed special interests in how boys learn. I have taken this interest into my setting.

Overall this course has enabled me to develop my confidence and passion in early years. I will be able to use what I have learnt to not only support me in my career but also with my future studies. I have already been able to support my staff team with training, guiding and motivating them to improve what we provide as a nursery, ensuring every child has a positive start. Attending lessons at university has given me opportunities to network with other students and share expertise as well as develop my confidence when speaking in public.

While the PDU has proven to be a valuable addition to the FdA EYCE course, it is not perfect. Despite being an accredited unit, many students still perceive it to be an added workload on their course, rather than being fully integrated like any other unit. Its online delivery gives it an outsider status separate from the rest of the degree, regardless of its linkages to the other units studied, while for many members of the course, coordinating

online work with colleagues was not always easy. A new iteration of the PDU is currently being planned that will hopefully manage these issues better in the future. There is also a possibility for the PDU to extend beyond its present scope of non-traditional students, as one of its main benefits could be argued to be the exposure to students of a multiplicity of perspectives and viewpoints. Students are helped through this to understand that expertise does not consist of the possession of particular items of knowledge, but rather develops gradually and continuously as part of the learning process (Zimitat, 2007). There is little doubt that the 'situated understandings' (Tillema and Orland-Barak, 2006, p.593) derived from the PDU have helped mature and uncertain learners integrate into university by making use of their personal backgrounds and tacit knowledge, but these conversations can be useful for any student on any degree.

Conclusion

The PDU has acted as a supported and supportive social mechanism for FdA EYCE students, offering the means by which the individual might gain validation of the self as a student and a sense of belonging through membership of a valued professional community. The fluid boundaries represented by the three overlapping circles of self, theory and practice answer the need to acknowledge and integrate all facets of the learner's life. Through the Benchmark Statement, the new student is not faced with the need to reject or ignore all else that they are, but rather is encouraged to draw upon it and feed back into it throughout the degree. The recognition of the whole person gives value to existing skills and embeds new learning into the broader context from which each student comes. Anxiety for students embarking on a new programme of study is often centred around the unknown and the unfamiliar (Johnson and Robson, 1999), so the permission given by the PDU to refer to and rely upon what is already known and familiar can be a source of great reassurance. Furthermore, the dual approaches of reflection and community work together to reinforce student confidence and each person's sense of legitimacy as a member of the university. A learner identity can potentially be developed through affinity with a valued group, and a focus on the individual as someone who has valuable knowledge to contribute to the learning community. The aspiration-building capacities of the Benchmark Statement, together with the confidence-building mechanisms of the discussion boards, work to position each new student within a learning community,

so that they might better engage with their studies and their practice, and experience the transformative power of learning.

Acknowledgement

This paper is an outcome of the National Action Research Network on researching and evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio practice project (2007-2010). The project was led by the University of Bolton in association with the University of Worcester and Centre for Recording Achievement, and in national collaboration with the University of Bedfordshire, Bournemouth University and University of Bradford. The project was funded by the Higher Education Academy, National Teaching Fellowship Project strand. More details about the project can be found at:

<http://www.recordingachievement.org/research/narn-tree.html>.

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