



Reluctant learners: Their identities and educational experiences

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NCVER NEW RESEARCHER AWARD RECIPIENT

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Reluctant learners: Their identities and educational experiences by Ruth Wallace

One of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (NCVER) objectives is to build the research capacity of the vocational education and training (VET) sector. To this end, NCVER sponsored seven new researchers to attend NCVER's 2007 'No Frills' conference. One of these awards went to Ruth Wallace. This paper is based on her presentation at the conference.

Formal education and training can have a range of benefits for regional and remote areas, such as helping communities to meet their local skill needs. However, it is not always easy for those in regional and remote areas to undertake formal learning. In addition to the logistical obstacles faced by geographically isolated learners, it can also be the case that the requirements of formal education and training conflict with individuals' identities and compromise their community membership.

This paper explores this dilemma. The paper draws on interviews with 15 students in regional and rural areas of the Northern Territory, including participants from Indigenous backgrounds.

Key messages

- ✧ Students' identities and community membership—including the attitudes and experiences of their families and communities—contribute to their behaviour and beliefs about undertaking formal education and training. Understanding these influences is a key element in successfully engaging rural and regional learners in education.
- ✧ Students are likely to succeed at their studies when their families and communities support their education.
- ✧ Learners who successfully reconcile their studies with their identity and their community membership make use of a range of strategies. These include: accessing a supportive and recognised group in the local community; negotiating their study off campus; negotiating practical components in a known workplace, with local experts; and rehearsing ways to explain their study to their peers and community.

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Managing Director, NCVER

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Introduction and context

This study explores the relationship between regional people's identities, their experiences of learning, and engagement with learning. Fifteen adult learners describe those experiences of education and the significant impact of their learning identity on their engagement with learning in the long term. The study was based in a regional area of the Northern Territory and includes people from different age groups and backgrounds including Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, long-term residents and migrants from other places. The participants describe their learning identity as it relates to their identity as individuals and members of local, family and global communities.

Learning is constructed by a range of historical, social, cultural and regional influences. That is, our experience of learning is influenced by where we live, what we believe, the people around us, our experiences in school and at home. Identities are also socially located, informed by previous experiences, a range of different community memberships, the knowledge systems we work within and against, and the governance of those relationships. Analysing learners' engagement in education and training in terms of their social, physical, historical and cultural locations offers an insight into learners' identities and the ways identities change throughout people's lives. By understanding learners' identities as disenfranchised students, formal educational institutions can better meet their needs and open their doors to diverse members of their communities.

Both learning and identity are described as socially located. Falk and Balatti (2003) observe the link that exists between education and identity: learners are affected by the ways they understand themselves and define their identity. Crenshaw (2003) describes identities as social constructions, with particular reference to socially constructed notions of gender and race and their impact on a person's identity. A person's identity, their knowledge and view of themselves or the way they are identified by others, can impact on the way they interact with formal learning. The effect of educational institutions and communities legitimatising only certain or 'approved' types of learning and social practices can be to affirm or challenge the identities of learners. That is, students who share the same ways of learning succeed and those who do not can be seen as different or difficult. Understanding the contexts in which learners operate can be linked, then, to understanding the role of identity in learning and the things that inform that identity.

The disparity between learners' interpretations of life and knowledge, and educational institutions' interpretations of learners' lives and knowledge in regional Australia, can impact on learners' engagement with education and training. Recent studies (Searle, Funnell & Behrens 2005; Rennie, Wallace, Falk & Wignell 2004; Wallace & Turnbull 2005) have explored the disjuncture between teachers' and students' relationship to the knowledge, learning environments and pedagogies recognised in schools. Lankshear and Knobel (2003, p.179) studied the disconnections between the cultural identities and experiences that made it difficult for teachers to connect learning events to students' experiences, teach for diversity, and lessen the effects of disadvantage. Pakoa (2005) supports these findings in a study of the impact of identity and socially based expectations on the educational experiences and outcomes of Melanesian postgraduate students in higher education in Australia. Smyth and Hattam (2004) describe this discontinuity and the impact on young people's education and identity as learners in senior secondary school. They explore the discontinuity between schools' assumptions about students' family background, support systems or knowledge

and the students' real situations. Young people found there was no place to discuss their experience and, as Pakoa notes:

... if they do attempt to 'speak', their voices are almost universally misunderstood in mainstream high schools. The reaction of the many young people living in poverty to the alienating experience of school is almost universally misunderstood because of the unexamined assumptions schools have about the lives of young Australians.

(Pakoa 2005, p.108)

Smyth & Hattam (2004) found the type of relationship between students and their schools was closely linked to the way in which students' knowledge and realities were understood by the school and incorporated into learning environments. Both Smyth & Hattam and Pakoa's studies found students felt marginalised by common misunderstandings that assume everyone has the same resources to succeed in education. When considering resources involved in learning, it could be useful to consider the *identity resources* that operate in educational contexts. Falk and Kilpatrick defined identity resources as the 'common understandings related to personal, individual and collective identities' (2001, p.100). More specifically, they consist of cognitive and affective attributes such as vision, trust, self-confidence and commitment to community. These are not necessarily common to students enrolled in formal education. It is of value then to consider the identity resources disenfranchised students have and how they impact on their learning identities and engagement.

Learning in regional areas is complex. Field (2006) has noted the decreasing availability of work for unskilled and unqualified people and the impact of global competition which has moved much of this work to countries with low-cost labour. These changes have significant impacts on regional communities through the reduction of unqualified positions available and the expectation that workers gain qualifications in previously unqualified areas. This prompts the question: if involvement in training and education offers good returns, why don't people enrol and participate?

In discussing Indigenous education, Schwab (1996, p.11) notes:

... according to human capital theory individuals make decisions in order to maximize their private rates of return. Yet, when the patterns of indigenous participation in higher education are examined closely, it appears most individuals are not making the sorts of decisions that would most benefit them.

By better understanding the reasons for learner disengagement, educational policy can be refined to effectively engage students. Effective policy to involve disenfranchised learners would understand the reasons these groups have resisted decades of support programmes. To be relevant to their participants' experiences, formal education systems can recognise and integrate students' realities and the diversity of the society in which they operate. This includes understanding the diverse knowledge systems, languages, discourses and registers that inform people's identities and how students operate and negotiate their individual, family, community and working lives.

This study seeks to understand students' perceptions of themselves as learners. It investigates the role of identity in regional disenfranchised learners' under-participation in formal post-compulsory education and training. The findings and the implications for educational delivery in regional areas are discussed. The findings of this study can be used to develop teaching strategies that recognise learners' identities as members of various learning communities and develop inclusive learning environments.

Methodology

The research project described in this paper is part of a PhD study conducted in a regional area of the Northern Territory. The research explores the question: ‘How do identities affect engagement with formal post-compulsory education and training with particular reference to adults from social groups historically disenfranchised from educational institutions?’.

The research looks specifically at regional learners and seeks to understand:

- ✧ the ways issues of identity relate to learning engagement
- ✧ barriers and enablers related to identity that impact on active engagement in formal education and training
- ✧ constructs of identity that support active involvement in formal education and training
- ✧ the ways some adults develop the skills, knowledge and identity resources to effectively engage with and effect change within educational institutions
- ✧ issues that impact on learning and engagement in the workplace.

Data was gathered from three representative groups from the region. Participants in the research all have some experience of formal education in their lives, although they have not necessarily continued to complete secondary school or post-compulsory education or training. All participants live in the identified region and some also work in that region.

Detailed portraits have been developed of the lifetime learning experiences of 15 adults in a regional community in the Northern Territory. The portraits were constructed from interviews with participants about their experiences of learning, learning practices and their relationship to identity resources; both those that are brought to learning and their interpretation through involvement in formal and informal learning. The participants reflect the people who live and work in the Northern Territory and include men and women aged between 20 and 100, who are unemployed or employed in professional and manual work, and live in a regional area of the Northern Territory. Participants originate from a range of cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous people from distinct families, regions, employment and educational backgrounds.

The transcripts were used to develop a portrait (Smyth & Hattam 2004) that profiled each learner’s trajectory through formal and informal engagement with learning. This included the learner’s:

- ✧ individual context
- ✧ community context
- ✧ educational context
- ✧ formal and informal educational history including professional learning
- ✧ multiliteracies profile
- ✧ critical incidents—milestones in learning

- ✧ attitudes to learning
- ✧ attitudes to self as a learner
- ✧ preferred ways of learning
- ✧ relationship to milestones and community
- ✧ ages, stages and purpose of learning events
- ✧ personal reflections.

The completed portraits were used to draw out the common themes and relationships. These understandings were used to discuss and develop pedagogical concepts that related to effective learning for people in regional areas. The cycle of building and testing portraits together and sharing the analysis process, while time-consuming, worked to support the development of an accurate representation.

Analysis and discussion

This section explores the ways in which an individual's identity has informed their participation in formal learning. In the following discussion, the term 'community identity' refers to a range of group identities that have meaning for the participants. These might include family, peer groups, community groups, workplaces, sporting groups and other interest groups.

Identity in alignment or opposition

For all participants, their experiences and attitudes about learning were essentially informed by the attitudes and approaches of their families and communities. Participants considered the connection between their identity and community membership as a central driver of their behaviour and beliefs about their place within formal learning systems. Managing opposing learning identities caused the majority of participants a personal conflict about their learning participation and their membership of the peer and family group. The greater the congruence between the beliefs and information in the home and school, the longer participants enjoyed school and learning and saw themselves as successful learners. Conversely, when knowledge and literacy were represented and valued in ways that were quite different from those in the home and peer groups, participants experienced greater conflict. When the learning practices opposed or negated learners' and communities' identities, learners were faced with the choice of changing their identity or rejecting the experience or activity. Many learners described the difficult choices they faced about learning engagement that were not necessarily obvious to educators.

Participants described ways they attempted to manage this learner identity conflict throughout their lives or found ways to participate in learning by avoiding the sources of conflict. One participant explained why they did not participate in a machinery licence course, even though they had driven this kind of machinery for over 10 years. Recent occupational health and safety regulations in the participant's workplace had changed and a licence was required for the participant to continue working. They were offered negotiated assessment and low literacy-based materials to support their participation. But when the participant had to go to the urban institution site and be assessed by people with unknown credibility, the participant decided not to attend. As a result, the participant's employment opportunities were reduced. For that participant, however, loss of income was not worth the personal risk of venturing out of the community.

Sources of conflict for other participants included: physical appearance; ways of expressing ideas; inclusion of locally valued information; involvement of family and their knowledge; being on the educational institution site or resources; being able to direct learning to meet personal trajectories; being assessed by unrecognised assessors; and fitting into the educational system. These identity conflicts had the power to override other priorities and influence an individual's decision to be involved in education.

Challenging established identities was time-consuming and difficult; people needed a range of strategies developed over a long time to manage this conflict. Participants who were able to resolve these conflicts had strong family or community identities or an overriding purpose that allowed them to take risks and test different learner identities.

Making choices and living with tension

Views about what knowledge is important and how it should be used are not always shared by the learner and the educational institution. Where this conflict occurs, participants have to choose between developing the skills and roles related to the educational institution's view or those of their family and peers. For the most part, participants chose that of their families and peers.

Taking part in formal education was often described as opposing full participation in family or community identities or activities. Participants worried about their peers thinking they were acting as though they were 'better' because they used technical language, and had (or potentially might have) a qualification. This tension was regularly challenged throughout people's lives. Participants referred to this tension when describing times when they wanted to make a change that involved formal education. For many, being involved in activities such as independent study, participation in classes, using a computer, or undertaking formal assessment was an insurmountable challenge—not because of the task, but because of the risk to individuals' associated identities. Only when the desire to be involved in education was clearly essential and articulated to their peer group in accepted terms, were people able to negotiate the conflicts in their identities. Furthermore, the desire to pursue the learning needed to be stronger than the fear of being excluded or ridiculed.

One participant was only successful in their attempts to improve their VET qualifications when they undertook their study with a local group based in the community. However, learning in this environment depended on the commitment of the group, and as the group waxed and waned, so did their success. While this made long-term study difficult, participating in a course as a group in the local community, based in the community and negotiated by the group with the institution, enabled participants to remain involved and describe the activity and its purpose to a wider audience.

Participants without community support had quite different experiences. One student was teased about spending time and energy in an undervalued pursuit which was actively sabotaged through interference and distractions. In developing computer and academic skills, they were described as becoming 'less of a man' (as defined by their peer group).

Resolving learner identities

Participating in learning activities was not simple. Participants who were able to manage difficult and confronting educational situations were those who could manage and resolve their learner identities. To do this, the participants used strategies including: accessing a supportive and recognised group in the local community; negotiating their study off campus; negotiating practical components in a known workplace, with local experts; and rehearsing ways to explain their study to their peers and community.

One participant described the enrolling institution as irrelevant and as a place they did not like attending. To address this, the participant identified local people who knew parts of the course, and had the texts, experiences and contacts to support their learning. In essence, the participant created a locally approved learning network. These strategies were driven by a desire to complete study and minimise the negative experiences of formal education. Successful learners were able to negotiate their learner identity as it related to their community identity; for example, they could explain why they were studying and relate it to other approved activities.

Those participants who were able to participate in post-compulsory education throughout their lifetime had very strong support from a family or community member(s) who assisted in resolving the inconsistent identities that were operating. These were achieved through, for example, having

high levels of recognition as a member of a longstanding and valued member of the community, participating in activities that demonstrate the ways the learning will be relevant in local community or when a family member articulated the need to be prepared for a new world that would involve membership of the local and formal institutions. In these situations the risk of being involved in formal education was reduced and an individual had a support mechanism to mediate and explain their involvement in education.

Implications and conclusion

Recognising learners' identities is key to their educational engagement. Developing approaches to delivering education that align with students' identities can improve the engagement of regional learners. This can be done by expanding our understanding of learning and recognising that learners are part of a range of local, professional and global communities. Some of the important elements of the relationships and expertise in regional networks and workplace systems can be recognised and incorporated into the formal education system. This will benefit many marginalised regional learners.

Local experts can undertake roles as non-accredited facilitators and assessors. These people have a wealth of knowledge and experience in their content area and are accepted as understanding the norms of the community and the context in which people will be working. The positive examples of learning for many participants related to workplace learning from community-accepted and recognised experts and from peers. By learning from the person considered good with animals, cars, children and so on, the participant was understood to have learnt the 'correct way' and able to transfer the knowledge into locally relevant situations. This could be tested by observing the participant's work or talking to co-workers and accessing their developing expertise in strengthening social relationships and resources.

Formal educational institutions could form partnerships with local experts to offer local workplace-based accredited assessment. This is an opportunity to develop a shared understanding about the role of learning and connections between formal and informal learning. This process maintains the focus on negotiating education systems and practices rather than negotiating identity and learning deficits. In addition, local regional experts and accredited trainers can develop strong partnerships that inform learning experiences, content and qualifications.

Partnerships with community members can also offer valuable learning experiences for educators in educational institutions and the systems that design training packages and pedagogy. Learning partnerships have the potential to affirm everyone's identity as valued and essential participants in knowledge construction and expression. This can occur through the use of peer conversations and workplace-based action learning. Local community networks can assist in identifying local resources and networks that can support educational opportunities and create links to activities that are recognised locally and valued as learning. Learning partnerships based around the learner identities may challenge the established processes in determining educational policy and practice but can broaden the relevance of education to a broader constituency and engage disenfranchised learners.

To refine and better understand the knowledge and learning practices that operate in the community and the classroom, there need to be opportunities to openly explore and make explicit the multiplicity of views. In this context, the aim is to understand diversity. Knowledge and practices are then examined to offer opportunities to explore their complexity, uses, impact and relationship to identities, group membership and imagined futures.

Through understanding students' skills, cultural and social contexts, their histories and future development, trainers have an opportunity to discuss other forms of literacy or knowledge that may have limited or no relation to students' experiences or identities. This approach reinforces, rather

than threatens or displaces, students' knowledge and identities. Students have ways to consider the relevance of the knowledge or skill to their life before needing to explain and test its use with other members of their communities. Learners can use different skills and knowledge to support their identity, to share their knowledge in new ways and ensure their identity is affirmed.

Where local community members and lecturers are both involved in local events, a shared understanding can be developed about the educational goals and needs of a community. As these goals and needs will be as complex as any group of people, their negotiation with educational systems involves contradictions and discomfort. This process will have challenges and setbacks over time and its negotiation involves persistence and goodwill; however, it is these things that establish the basis of relationships and the sharing of ideas and knowledge. These ongoing relationships involve a willingness to listen and change in light of developing understandings, and will challenge accepted practice and offer insights that inform educational processes in the long term. These developing relationships and shared knowledge support the development of professional educators who understand the importance of students' identities.

Understanding the role of identity is a key element in developing a community and student-centred approach to learning. By validating learners' identities, the education system develops its understanding of students, their knowledge and their social context. Students are then offered opportunities to maintain their integrity while negotiating other forms of knowledge, literacy and identity on their terms. A community-centred approach to learning works to understand the impact of identity on participation and develop pedagogies in partnership with community members.

This study seeks to throw some light on the importance of individual identities as they relate to some communities in regional Northern Territory. Teachers play an important role in understanding learners' identities. It is time to rethink a one-size-fits-all approach to education (NCVER 2004). By developing an understanding of students' identities in relation to their family, local and global communities' knowledge and identities, we develop a starting point for an education system that works from students' strengths and knowledge, and adapts teaching and learning to support and reinforce people's identities as learners.

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