

## Learning through work: How can a narrative approach to evaluation build students' capacity for resilience?

SUSAN MATE<sup>1</sup>

RMIT Vietnam, Saigon, Vietnam

MAUREEN RYAN

Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

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Some professionals have a conscious purpose-driven 'professional identity' and others forge an identity over time and through various work experiences. This research draws on the narratives professionals at different life and career stages shared about their professional development. The findings highlight the importance attributed to resilience, among broader themes associated with building professional identity. Vignettes of the stories told by two of the participants are presented here to highlight ways in which resilience can be acquired, for example, by building networks and being adaptable. It is proposed that narrative analysis techniques could be used to build students' awareness and understanding of resilience when participating in work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences. In the same way that a resilience discourse emerged in the narratives of successful professionals, introducing the notion and language of work-related resilience to students may improve their chances of having successful, fulfilling and enduring careers. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, Special Issue, 2015, 16(3), 153-161*)

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'Work-integrated learning' (WIL) is an umbrella term used to describe a range of approaches to practice-based education, usually involving student placements in the workplace (Grealish, 2012; Higgs, 2011; IRU & ACCI, 2011). This paper begins with the premise that professional identity is developed through work, and therefore can be cultivated through WIL. Although some people may have a model 'professional identity' that they strive toward attaining, others develop an identity over time and through various work experiences. A number of authors that explore development of careers have suggested that storytelling is the way in which individuals make sense of their lived experience and career identity (Bamberg, 2010, 2012; Del Corso & Rehfuß, 2011; McAdams, 2011; McMahan & Watson, 2013; McMahan, Patton, & Watson, 2004; Savickas et al., 2009; Singer, 2004; White, 1989, 1992). Professional identities are constructed from local and institutional knowledge of an individual's social positioning and behaviors are learned that constitute valuable cultural and social capital (Bain, 2005; Bottrell, 2009; Grant & Kinman, 2011; McAllister & McKinnon, 2009).

Narrative analysis can provide a means to explore the various ways in which professional identity is developed (see Mate, 2010). Narrative identity theories are situated in the discursive and dialogical branch of narrative theory (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008). This paper considers how a narrative approach could assist professionals, WIL co-ordinators, and students engaged in WIL experiences evaluate learning through work. Effective WIL experiences emerge from three-way partnerships between employers, universities or other learning institutions and students (IRU & ACCI, 2011), in which the parties agree on tasks and learning goals. Communities of practice, in which stakeholders engage in regular conversations and share methods, may assist these complex agreements (Le Cornu, 2009; Wenger, 1998). When evaluating student WIL experiences, it is important to consider how relationships are built to develop students' insight into their professional identities, but also how communities of knowledge are built to engage students in their WIL experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Susan Mate, susan.mate@rmit.edu.vn

Carson and Bedeian (1994) define career commitment as a person's motivation to work, and identify three key components: career resilience (resistance to career disruptions and setbacks); career identity (emotional attachment to career); and career planning (strategic approach to career development). This paper explores the notion of resilient qualities as 'traits', but also as a 'state'. Traits are qualities, often measurable, that distinguish one person from another, for example, extroversion. In contrast, a 'state' may include what we experience in life and what cultural or social experiences we are faced with that facilitate an opportunity to demonstrate a particular quality. Plomin (2004) argues that human behaviors are not limited to state or trait, but rather by trait and state. Rutter (2007) suggests that resilience is something people develop by being in adverse situations. In a general sense, resilience can be understood as a concept that focuses on building individuals' wellbeing (Rutter, 2001) or as positive adaptations to adverse circumstances (Masten, 2001; Redl, 1969). Resilience is important in social policy because it focuses on quality enhancement, and is associated with social capital, such as building social networks (Bottrell, 2009). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) define resilience as adapting to a cultural context in order to achieve a successful outcome despite challenging circumstances. The precise definition of resilience depends on the kinds of adversity faced and, as such, is related not only to personal but also to broader social and political issues. Wagnild (2014) developed a diagnostic tool with a resilience scale that explores how people 'bounce back' from failure; how people fail without losing their enthusiasm for work.

Resilience is described by many authors as the ability to interact with the environment (Cicchetti & Blender, 2006; Feder, Nestler, & Charney, 2009; Wengnild & Young, 1990). Contemporary theories of resilience primarily focus on factors that mitigate the risks of adverse conditions and circumstances (Bottrell, 2013; Rutter, 2001). Resilience is sometimes described as an important capability within institutional contexts. For example, RMIT University, Australia, has a code of conduct which is underpinned by a behavioral capability framework, within which resilience is defined as the capacity to adapt and knowing when to seek support. Eade (2007) describes capacity-building as an approach that identifies obstacles that inhibit development as well as those that facilitate development. Resilience has been described as an emerging positive organizational behavior trait (Luthans & Youssef, 2007), and in organizations where resilience capacities are rewarded this is seen as a strength in changing environmental circumstances that enables organizations to survive and thrive (Luthans, 2002).

The aim of this paper is to observe the importance professionals attribute to their own resilience in regard to career success and identity. Insights from interviews with professionals are used as a rationale to propose resilience as an important inclusion in student WIL experiences and evaluation. However, the approach of the present study was to explore how people perceive growth and development in their working lives and was, therefore, a reflective rather than motivational construct.

## METHODOLOGY

For this study, in-depth interviews were conducted over a two-year period, with a total of thirty participants at various career and life stages, all working in professional roles. The sample group was selected by purposive sampling, identified through professional networks accessible to the researcher. Participants were asked to provide a narrative about how they have grown and developed in their work. The interviewer was an experienced career

consultant and met the participants on several occasions to clarify their stories. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed following the interview.

The empirical approach utilised in this study was narrative analysis. Bamberg & Andrews (2004) argue that we develop our identities as professionals by telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell. Riessman (1993, 2002, 2008) defines narrative interviews as a discursive process in which participants engage in an evolving conversation that is collaboratively produced. The narrative career counselling approach applied in this study (described as one that provides opportunity for reflection on career resources) has been explored by numerous researchers (see Campbell & Ungar, 2004a, 2004b; McMahon & Watson, 2013; McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2004; Savickas, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2008; Saviackas et al., 2009).

The key question participants were asked was: How have you developed and grown in your professional life? Prompts were then used to encourage reflection on any barriers experienced and how these were overcome. A combination of structural and thematic analysis was developed to explore discursive patterns in transcripts. There are various techniques available under the narrative family of methods (Riessman, 1993, 2002, 2008). The present study is based on a methodological approach that has been applied in varied forms by narrative researchers (Bamberg, 1997, 2003, 2006, 2011, 2012; Johnson, 2009; Riessman, 2008). Themes in the full data set were compared using a method of analysing proportion of time spent on each theme using NVivo 9. Coding was applied to dominant and counter themes. A matrix of relationships was formed by cross-tabulating the coded themes. Definitions of 'counter story' are drawn from Bamberg & Andrews (2004) and Chase (1995).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this paper, examples of two cases are presented (Betty and Ernest, which are pseudonyms), including vignettes to highlight certain themes, together with a summation of the overall themes evident across all participants. A number of dominant and counter themes were identified across the data set (Table 1). Participants told stories about their identities as professionals – stories about the struggle to develop and grow in the context of their work and sometimes about the way their life in general impacted on work. The stories participants told were dependent on their life experiences and their interactions at work. Overall, the dominant theme communicated the story of career success, and the counter themes communicated emotional and social features in the work culture that influenced participants' experiences. Thus, behind the dominant narrative of career progression and success there was a counter narrative about the qualities required, 'traits' or conditions, that enabled the participants to progress. For instance, counter themes included challenges and how they were overcome. One of the counter stories, which forms the focus of the present paper, was about building resilience. Participants were encouraged to consider how they had overcome barriers and how this assisted them to develop an understanding of their professional identity and their capacity for resilience.

In addition to the counter theme about developing resilience, many of the themes discussed by Betty and Ernest and the other participants related in some way to resilience (Table 1). Adaptability and flexibility are clearly forms of resilience. Likewise, becoming part of a professional group and building relationships as a means to create networks are highly likely to contribute to career resilience. Formal education and informal knowledge can buoy confidence in one's own abilities. Interestingly, some of the barriers that participants

TABLE 1: Counter and dominant narrative themes

	Junior*		Middle*		Senior*	
	Female (n=10)	Male (n=2)	Female (n=10)	Male (n=2)	Female (n=3)	Male (n=3)
<i>Counter themes</i>						
Adaptability and flexibility	0	1.5	1.7	0.3	2.9	0
Becoming part of professional group	1.0	1.0	1.3	1.3	1.0	1.0
Formal education and informal knowledge	2.0	2.0	1.6	12.0	3.0	2.3
Recognising barriers and developing resilience	2.0	1.0	16.0	3.0	22.0	4.0
<i>Dominant themes</i>						
Building relationships	5	5	9	8	15	5
Capacity for introspection	4	3	8	8	15	12
Pursuit of hero or heroine quest	6	12	13	14	12	7
Recognising ingredients for productivity	8	10	8	11	19	17

## Notes:

- 1.\* Junior is 1-24 years professional early career employment, middle is 15-24 years professional middle management employment, and senior is 25-35 years professional senior management employment.
2. Values indicate the number of times participants referred to each theme divided by the number of participants in each group.

identified in their early life reappeared at various phases throughout their careers as problems that needed to be confronted. Capacity for introspection allows for honest self-analysis; for example, one participant described a key factor in his success as gaining insight into his strengths as a professional. He also described his awareness of job market opportunities, including his capacity to research opportunities and create opportunities, as a form of resilience. Pursuit of a quest may also provide motivation to propel individuals through difficult times as they aim for goals ahead.

Both Ernest and Betty were in senior managerial roles at the time of the interviews: Betty a deputy vice-chancellor in a university and Ernest a chief executive officer in a company that provides leadership development programs to a range of corporate businesses. It was clear

from their interviews that neither had a detailed career plan when they left university, but certain capacities helped them to succeed in their professions. Betty talked about what she saw as some of the ingredients for success, such as adaptability: "Stay focused on your work, and persevere in the face of adversity, be prepared to change jobs too; if not between organizations, at least within your organization".

Similarly, Ernest discussed adaptability as an important characteristic, including being open to ideas and learning to adapt to business or corporate cultures different to earlier affiliations or cultures: "I acted opportunistically. As things arose I said 'OK I'll do that'. I never sort of said 'I'll go into this area'. I've always said 'What looks interesting? What looks exciting? Let's do that'."

Betty also discussed the importance of building relationships and believed that when she did, opportunities "opened up". Betty rated relationship-building and listening to others' views as qualities that helped her develop in her work, saying "It is important not to work alone. Develop colleagues of the same level but also above. Without that it is really hard".

Ernest also highlighted the importance of relationships, of human interaction in the workplace.

I think it's about human interaction . . . I mean the business side of it in a way doesn't interest me very much. It's the human side of it that interests me more, or maybe it's the human/business interface that's interesting.

Ernest told of developing his own resilience through difficult experiences.

It is a very intense developmental process whenever you do a theatre production because you're working with other creative people, composers and artists and actors and designers and so there are experiences in there that are very difficult as well, emotional and personal growth ones. I think they're much rarer in business.

Overall, professionals in the latter stage of their career demonstrated insight into the ways they had come to understand their identity as professionals and how they had achieved career success. The women of the three groups referred to the counter narrative (how they overcame barriers and built resilience) far more often than the men. It is possible that women may require greater resilience than men over their careers. Women also spent more time recounting the ways others had assisted them to develop and grow in their professional roles. Each participant positioned their story in personal, social and cultural experiences. The themes represented in Table 1 were discussed by all participants, although for varied durations, and thus all acknowledged the importance of developing a capacity to overcome boundaries and develop resilience.

## DISCUSSION

Professionals in the present study narrated stories about their professional identity that were interwoven with the importance of resilience. Although there was diversity in the way people told stories about professional experiences and identity, there were themes that ran across and between the cohorts. People at different life and career stages emphasised a range of themes related to capacity. The professionals who shared their stories directly considered resilience to be an important capacity, and many of the themes discussed could be considered relevant to resilience and professional identity, such as adaptability and building relationships. The participants reflected on how they developed resilience in adverse

circumstances and how challenging experiences were overcome. The females in the senior roles, in particular, provided a more in-depth understanding of resilience. Both males and females in more senior roles, who had been in the workforce for a longer period of time, also provided more information about the importance of resilience in their working lives. The professionals in this study also told stories about how building resilience had enabled them to contribute effectively in their workplace. These findings reinforce the idea that professional identity is developed through overcoming challenges.

Narrative approaches, like the one used in the present study, can consider personal factors that are often overlooked in studies of 'career', in which resilience is often viewed in individualistic terms (or as a trait). Further, narrative techniques constitute an effective method of sharing experiences and insights across partnership teams. Narrative analysis has been proposed as a way to enable discussion about WIL (Grealish, 2012; Higgs, 2011). By developing opportunities for stakeholders engaged in WIL projects to evaluate learning through work using narrative methods, it may be possible to build resilience and awareness of other capacities. Studies have explored how communities of practice can be relevant for building knowledge about practice-based learning (Grealish, 2012; Higgs, 2011); however, none have focused on how they may be utilised to build resilience and career endurance in students. Here, a narrative approach used within a communities of practice framework is proposed as a key method to gain insight into students' WIL engagements and assess outcomes for students while evaluating program and learning outcomes.

One of the benefits of building resilience in students may be retention of numbers; for instance, high proportions of new teachers leave the profession in the first five years of teaching (Le Cornu, 2009). Teachers who stay in the profession beyond the first few years operate within a 'resilience framework', that is, the ability to create support networks and to persevere when confronted with risks and dilemmas (Benard, 2004; Biglan et al., 2004). Building resilience has often been associated with the role of professional practice and the opportunities people have to build relationships (Jordan, 2006; Le Cornu, 2009; Mate, 2013). Similarly, senior managers who have experienced adverse situations place greater importance on resilience than those who have not needed to adapt and seek support from others (Mate, 2013). The opportunity for students to see themselves and others in a broader context could help balance what may be seen in early career development as a dominance of individual attribution. As such, it can enhance a reflective approach to the workplace: a broader understanding of financial, organizational and policy structures within the workplace and the roles that individuals play in their implementation, mediation, maintenance, change, development and improvement.

#### CONSIDERATION OF APPLICATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the findings of this empirical study, recommendations for application include introducing resilience as a topic for discussion in classes, but also as a theme for reflection after practical placements. For example, the topic of resilience could be discussed in an organisation behavior class. Culture in organisations could be discussed in terms of leadership, power, control and resilience. Students may express the idea that they have not very often been in a situation where they were asked to question formal hierarchical control and were not aware of the notion of developing resilience. Broader discussion could be included about the role of mentors by giving students a mentor (particularly with someone who has experience working within an organisation and developed stories about strategies to

build resilience). By sharing narratives with others they may gain insight into how mentors may help them develop an understanding of workplace culture and also their own resilience within the workplace. A guest speaker may also provide awareness of the importance of building resilience. A group project that involves exploring how individuals in an industry group build their resilience may provide peer learning and learning through project work that engages industry. Students may also be prompted to explore what sort of workplace culture would align with their own values and question why this may be important. Students who undertake internships could be required to complete a reflective writing exercise to consider how they demonstrated resilience and strengthened their capacity to understand work culture.

In conclusion, this research offers insight into the way narratives are embedded within workplace cultures and provides a rich source of understanding about capacity development, in particular, resilience. The way obstacles are understood by people, and by those who facilitate development, can be explored through a narrative approach, and therefore the approach provides scope for capacity development. The professionals who shared their stories here directly considered building resilience to be an important capacity, and many of the themes discussed could be considered relevant to resilience and professional identity. Further exploration into building resilience capacities is recommended as a way to enhance students' employability. In order to support students in a demanding and ever-changing world of work, educators may need to consider how they embed resilience-building capacities into WIL curriculums. It is argued throughout this paper that adoption of narrative approaches, perhaps within learning community models during WIL placements, may develop students' ideas about their professional identity, but also their capacity to recognize and build resilience.

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Types of manuscripts the Journal accepts are primarily of two forms; *research reports* describing research into aspects of Cooperative Education and Work Integrated Learning/Education, and *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and give critical explorative discussion around a topical issue.

The Journal does also accept *best practice* papers but only if it present a unique or innovative practice of a Co-op/WIL program that is likely to be of interest to the broader Co-op/WIL community. The Journal also accepts a limited number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

*Research reports* should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry, a description and justification for the methodology employed, a description of the research findings-tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance for practitioners, and a conclusion preferably incorporating suggestions for further research.

*Topical discussion* articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical discussion of the importance of the issues, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.



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