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

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This paper considers the way professionals talk about their capacity for resilience in stories of their careers. The way narratives could be used to construct stories about resilience and other capacities is considered relevant to gaining insight into professional identity. In using the term ‘professional identity’ we acknowledge that some professionals have a conscious purpose-driven identity and others learn through social interactions about the culture of the workplace and the experiences they have that are valuable in the workplace. The empirical research draws on the narratives professionals at different life and career stages share about their professional development over their careers. The research findings highlight the importance attributed to building resilience, but also the themes associated with building professional identity. Vignettes of the stories told are presented in this paper to highlight ways in which resilience is acquired through building networks and being adaptable.

Based on the findings of this study, it is proposed that building students’ understanding of resilience should be an important element of work integrated learning (WIL). Developing resilient qualities through participating in communities of practice may improve the quality of the students’ experiences and improve their chances of having successful, fulfilling and enduring careers.

Keywords: Narrative analysis, professional identity, work integrated learning

This paper considers how a narrative approach to building capacity for resilience can assist professionals, work integrated learning (WIL) co-ordinators in universities who manage student placements, and students engaged in WIL experiences evaluate learning through work. It is suggested that a community of practice approach for co-ordinators of WIL could provide opportunities to discuss and showcase how they overcome problems and build resilience in implementing WIL practices. Further, narrative constitutes a very effective methodology for sharing experiences and insights across partnership teams. The community of practice approach is also useful for students engaged in WIL practices because it enables students to discover how others build their resilience through work experiences. The community of practice approach enables participants to reveal the situated nature of learning (Grealish, 2012).

This paper begins with the premise that resilience can be developed through work, and therefore through WIL experiences. 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). Masten et al. (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. Resilience is sometimes described as an important capability within institutional contexts. For example, RMIT University 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 is an important concept for social policy because it focuses on quality enhancement, and is associated with social capital, particularly building social networks (Bottrell, 2009). 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 (Bottrell, 2009). Contemporary theories of resilience primarily focus on factors that mitigate the risks of adverse conditions and circumstances (Bottrell, 2013; Rutter, 2001). Within this paper the concept of resilience is understood to have implications for building communities of knowledge within universities about WIL and the data demonstrate the way talking about capacity may be developed via narrative analysis and by telling stories.

The aim of this paper is to emphasise the importance professionals attribute to their own resilience in regard to their career success, and how resilience and other capacities are drawn upon to tell a story about a person’s
professional identity. A narrative approach is proposed as a key method to gain insight into students’ WIL engagements and to assess outcomes for students while evaluating program and learning outcomes.

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 participate in an interview to discuss their experiences of growth and development 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 and 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; Savickas, 1997, 2001, 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). This study is based on a methodological approach that has been applied in varied forms by narrative researchers (Bamberg, 2003, 2006, 2011; Johnson, 2003, 2009; Johnson & Watson, 2004; 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 and Andrews (2004) and Chase (1995).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this paper, examples of two cases are presented (Betty and Ernest, pseudonyms), including vignettes to highlight certain themes, together with a summation of the overall themes evident across all participants. 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 a reflection of their interactions at work. Overall, the dominant career theme communicated the story of career success, and the counter themes communicated emotional and social features in the work culture that influenced participants’ experiences. For instance, counter themes included problems and how challenges were overcome. One of the counter stories, which form 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.

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 organisations, at least within your organisation.*

Similarly, Ernest discussed adaptability as an important characteristic, including being open to ideas and learning to adapt to a business or corporate culture that was different from his earlier affiliations with the arts culture:

*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.’*
Ernest, like many of the participants, told stories about developing their resilience through engaging in difficult experiences.

Table 1 summarises the dominant and counter themes identified across the data set. The narrative method is adaptable and could be used when facilitating and evaluating outcomes of community of practice session with university staff engaged in managing WIL projects and placements but also for evaluating program and learning outcomes.

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<th>Senior</th>
<th>Middle</th>
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<td>Women</td>
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<td>Counter themes</td>
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<td>Adaptability and flexibility</td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<td>1.7</td>
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<td>Becoming part of professional group</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formal education and informal knowledge</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognising the barriers and learning to adapt</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominant themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building relationships</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capacity for introspection</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pursuit of hero or heroine quest</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognising ingredients for productivity</td>
<td>19</td>
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Numbers indicate the number of times participants referred to each theme, divided by the number of participants in each group, so the prevalence of themes is portrayed by life phase and level of responsibility.

DISCUSSION

By drawing on a narrative approach it becomes clear how this framework can be used to focus on the less dominant discourses, which can provide insight into struggles within work cultures. This paper explores how professionals narrate their stories about their professional identity and how resilience is woven into this story as an important capacity to develop. The narrative method of analysis is highlighted as a way to enable people to engage in discussion about practice-based learning (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. The finding suggests that different people at different life and career stages emphasise various themes that can be seen to be linked to capacity. Although there is diversity in the way people tell stories about professional experience and professional identity, there are themes that run across and between generations. Building resilience has been associated with the role of professional practice and the opportunities people have to build relationships (Jordan, 2006; Le Cornu, 2009; Mate, 2013).

One of 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). Early career teachers who stay in the profession beyond the first few years operate within a ‘resilience framework’. A resilience framework is referred to as a student's ability to create their own support networks and learning experiences and to persevere when confronted with risks and dilemmas (Benard, 2004; Biglan et al., 2004). 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). Narrative analysis can provide a means to explore the local and global ways in which professional identity is developed (see Mate, 2010).

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). Effective WIL experiences emerge from three-way partnerships between the employer, the university and the student (IRU & ACCI, 2011), in which the parties together agree on tasks and learning goals. It is the responsibility of the university WIL coordinator to make decisions about the outcomes of any assessment aligned to stated (agreed) learning outcomes. As these assessments and evaluations of learning can be complex, communities of practice (where parties evaluating WIL opportunities engage in regular conversations and share methods of evaluation) may...
provide insight into how three-way agreements can be developed to engage parties effectively (Le Cornu, 2008; Wenger, 1988). In addition to establishing external affiliations, developing communities of practice across universities could provide opportunities for academic staff to discuss their implementation of WIL with colleagues from different disciplines. When evaluating the WIL experiences of students 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. These communities of practice may be developed through internal supports based within universities, but also through host organisations.

Narrative identity theories are situated in the discursive and dialogical branch of narrative theory (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008). Some studies have explored how communities of practice can be relevant for building knowledge about practice-based learning (Grealish, 2012; Higgs, 2011); however, they did not focused on how they may be utilised to overcome obstacles and potential risks associated with engaging students in practice-based learning, nor about how the narrative approach can be used to build students’ resilience and career endurance.

In conclusion, this research offers insight into the way narratives are embedded within workplace cultures and provide a rich source of understanding about capacity development. The way obstacles are understood by people, and by those that facilitate development, can be explored through a narrative approach and therefore the approach provides scope for capacity development. The professionals who shared their stories directly considered building resilience to be an important capacity, and many of the themes discussed could be considered relevant to resilience and professional identity. Consequently, it is argued throughout this paper that to adopt a narrative approach that may involve building a learning communities model during a WIL placement may have the scope to develop students’ knowledge about their professional identity, but also their capacity to build resilience.

REFERENCES


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