

## BANDING TOGETHER A WORK IN PROGRESS FORUM FOR LEARNERS, ALUMNI AND STAFF

Steve Henry

I am a facilitator for Otago Polytechnic's Capable NZ work-based learning programmes. During 2019 I hosted six ninety-minute forums to determine whether there would be learner, alumni and staff interest in collaborating to share experiences, solve common problems and build collegiality in Capable's Master of Professional Practice (MProfPrac) programme.

The MProfPrac is an academic qualification but its purpose is to transform real practice – it is a vehicle for identifying new learning in workplaces and making that new learning happen in very practical and observable ways. An *'in work, for work, about work'* mantra is frequently recited. Our learners work independently, supported by a facilitator and an academic mentor. For many, their only visits to the polytechnic are for final assessment, and graduation. Isolation, and lack of peer-to-peer contact is a commonly-observed shortcoming of this programme. Learners (and staff) are scattered around New Zealand. The programme of on-line forums described here is an approach to addressing that issue.

Current MProfPrac learners (about 100), and all 250 past learners (our alumni), were invited to attend. Forums were held in May, June and July, with further forums scheduled for August, September and October, with the last forum consisting of a 60 minute discussion of the value of the forum, and its possible future.

The forums were capped at 15 current learners and 5 alumni. They were oversubscribed, and a wait list was generated. Twelve of the 20 booked for the first forum logged-in on the day. Invitations to all wait-listed participants were invited to the second forum, and again 12 logged-in, half for the first time. In those first two forums, 25% of participants were alumni and 75% were current learners.

To date, feedback has been positive. Several participants have written to Steve Henry to share the value of the forum for them. One learner summed the value up as:

"I found the connection with other forum-members grew as we went through; not just the commonalities but the differences too. I can return to my new DRAFT for my MProfPrac review of learning with a new insight into why I struggled with the first DRAFT."

The forum conversations were structured so each person could introduce themselves; explain why they chose to enroll in the MProfPrac; describe their chosen focus of learning; and state where their learning was proving most valuable to them. This short agenda enabled rich conversations during the 90-minute events. Alumni present said that while they came along as an act of service, they were delighted to receive unexpected value from the conversations, as they initiated further reflection into their own learning.

All participants were invited to complete a survey with the option of an interview and a conversation with the learner's facilitator and academic mentor, testing for learning benefits.

As the facilitator of the forums, it has been magical to witness unexpected learning initiated by others from whom the learner would never expect to gain insight into their own practice. This is the magic of groups when people are willing to bring themselves and say out loud what is often kept as a thought narrative. Speaking the work out loud appears to change this. As to the future of the forums, the initial evidence suggests there would be value in such an event becoming a part of the learning landscape.

A complete analysis of the results and recommendations for the future will be published in a 2020 edition of *Scope* (full journal title to be determined).

**Steve Henry** is a facilitator at Capable NZ where he co-ordinates research and works across several programmes at Bachelor's and Master's level. He is based in Kaiteriteri, in the North of Te Wai Pounamu (the South Island) of Aotearoa | New Zealand. Steve is a Doctorate in Professional Practice candidate.