

TRANSFORMATION, A JOURNEY IN ADULT EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

You don't know what you don't know

It is not sufficient to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon an experience it may be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. It is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively (Gibbs, 1988, p. 9).

I, Michael Sarten first enrolled in tertiary study when I was 50 years old. Cushla Donnelly became my facilitator and academic mentor; following a career change. I had been working in government as a leader, in a dynamic role for a long period of time. I had become heavily institutionalised and indoctrinated into the ways of an organisation that relied on conditioned learning and linear thinking to achieve organisational goals. Upon leaving the role I wandered around in the private sector unsure of what I had to offer and what would likely be offered to me. I started to look for work that I thought suited me, there were many job applications and a lot of silence in reply. At this point, I didn't know what I didn't know.

In order to move forward, I recognised that I needed to upskill, I needed to change in *form nature or appearance*, to transform. I wanted to reach higher places in my career but against all the advice I was given as a much younger man I had never sought higher education. In one of my later roles I briefly worked with a member of the Capable NZ team who suggested that I upskill, which would open doors and provide better employment opportunities for me. I began my journey into knowing what I don't know.

It was recommended to me to enrol in the Graduate Diploma in Professional Practice, Occupational Health and Safety (GradDipProfPrac in Occupational Health and Safety) at Capable NZ, and following that, to validate my management and leadership practice, I chose to enrol in a Bachelor of Applied Management (BAppMgt). Having not previously studied at this level of academia, I was not sure if you could teach an old dog new tricks. I had never written at this level before either and had learnt many bad habits over time. When I first started my facilitator must have been horrified at my lack of polish but with infinite patience and review in a way that I was able to understand the polish started to be applied. Furthermore, I did not realise at the time that my desire to gain further skills and qualifications was the start of my learning, my personal and professional practice would be stretched and changed through deep critical reflection.

While studying my diploma I secured a leadership role with a large New Zealand company, based on evidence of my applied technical skills in health and safety and project management. However, it was while engaged in my BAppMgt that the transformation in my leadership skills has been recognised and rewarded by my employer. I believe that this recognition has come as a result of my reflecting on my historical leadership and management style and realising that I needed to make changes to my leadership practice in order to move forward in my career. At present I am earmarked for a role in the senior leadership team on a large project, a significant promotion in my field.

My period of study was carried out extramurally, potentially a solitary way to study with no other opinion or counsel to rely upon. However, Capable NZ programmes provide each learner with a facilitator that provides personal and specific guidance and support related to each programme of study. The facilitator role became crucial, keeping me on track during my thirst for knowledge, providing balance during the replication of the learning, and encouraging the enquiry in the investigation of that knowledge all of this supporting me to transform as a person.

Mentorship.

I had never had a mentor/facilitator before, I had always found my own way in the world; good or bad. Finding the ideal mentor is like finding the second scull in a rowing team, it takes patience, foresight and intuition. There is no perfect fit but on this occasion, the fit with my Capable NZ facilitator/academic mentor was spot on.

Carreau in her 2016 article at the website *Entrepreneur Asia Pacific* sums up the choosing of a mentor/facilitator very well, and the main point that Carreau identifies is that they should complement your style. Your mentor/facilitator should also display honesty and lateral thinking, they should provide you not with the answer but insight for you to find your answer; they should challenge you. Your mentor/facilitator need not have travelled the same path as you but they should be able to relate their life experiences to the path you are about to travel.

I found all this in spades with my facilitator during my two programmes of study. In the graduate diploma, I quickly saw that while we had not walked the same path our life experiences were complementary. I think that to have had the same life experiences would not be beneficial and that the learner would likely follow the mentor/facilitator too closely and not seek their own path.

The success of my relationship with my facilitator/mentor encouraged me to seek their company through a second programme of study, the BAppMgt, which I have completed. I have now enrolled in a third Capable NZ programme, the Master of Professional Practice (MProfPrac) with the same person filling the role of mentor, while I have additional support with a new facilitator:

“The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves”.

Steven Spielberg (Cyrus 2016)

Knowing what I don't know.

Having previously held leadership positions in my past employment, I was seeking employment in roles where I believed my leadership qualities were suitable. What I didn't recognise or understand was that I had no depth of knowledge as to what leadership and management meant. I had a style but had no idea of the many styles that were practiced in the role of leadership and what it meant to be a leader or manager in today's business world.

The graduate diploma in health and safety allowed me to explore my own ideas in a field that I was currently engaged in. The professional practice design and work based application of this programme provided me with insight into my chosen profession; not just learning but an applied research project that explored my profession in detail. This qualification was a great opportunity to open the door on knowing what I didn't know.

The BAppMgt, my second Capable NZ qualification was a revelation, allowing me to really explore knowing what I didn't know. It was heavily reflective, not something I am good at, due to having developed my technical skills and learned through being exposed to conditioned based learning all of my life. The BAppMgt required me to review my previous experiences and apply them to research to create a well rounded, reasoned outcome to my topics. During this course I was able to identify and explore my previous and current leadership and management qualities as well as researching new ways of doing things, which combined, have turned out to be useful in my current role and roles that I continue to seek.

My BAppMgt revealed to me who I was, I had my 'Napoleon moment' (McManus 2013). At the time I was reflecting on who I was at the start of my study, and during reflection on personality traits, I found that I closely resembled the character traits of Napoleon Bonaparte's personality and in some of my previous leadership experience I had carried out my role in a very similar manner to him. I had the traits, both good and bad of Napoleon's charismatic leadership style. Recognising and understanding my leadership style I was able to reflect on my past failures and successes; I am more aware of my leadership approach and professional practice, and how it may be received by others. My research has enabled me to recognise leadership character traits both good and bad in myself and others, allowing me to achieve greater success and deal with issues prior to them being realised. While comparing myself to Napoleon was amusing it did allow me to identify my charismatic leadership traits.

During my study, I opened a door on many other types of leadership and management both good, bad, past, present and future. In his '9 Qualities of a Servant Leader' review, Pritchard (2013) highlighted for me the value of serving before you lead, allowing me to acknowledge my servant leadership, to have served before I have lead. My transformational style, where I am able to motivate, inspire, train and lead a team to be strong and successful while still maintaining the goals of the organisation has been described by Burns (1978). These were both traits that I had previously displayed but had no knowledge of why or what it meant in exhibiting these traits.

In my research into the principles of management I was introduced to 'The Principles of Scientific Management' a monograph by Frederick Winslow Taylor (1919). Taylor's 'principles of management' had a profound effect on me. I have used his process of 'fitting a person to a position' not allowing a position to fit a person, on a number of occasions in my current role. In his writing, Taylor identified a number of other principles, such as 'initiative and incentive' where workers give their best initiative and in turn, they receive some special incentive from their employers. These are just some of the principles identified by Taylor many of which I have discussed with my other managers and encouraged them to adopt.

I also reviewed the future of management looking at the writing of Spacey (2016) identifying two styles to I see as the future of management, 'management by optimism' and the Japanese style of 'Genchi Genbutsu' (actual place, actual thing). The blending of these styles I see as the way forward in management, both of which I adopt and use every day in my role.

"The man who moves a mountain begins by carrying away small stones"

Chinese proverb (Truth inside of you. 2018)

Knowing what I know.

My study has all been carried out while working on a large roading project as a health and safety manager. My role is challenging daily to keep staff safe and encourage management to balance promoting safety in the workplace while also delivering a quality product on time and making a profit.

The topic of my graduate diploma's professional project was 'The Psychology of Accidents/Incidents', highly pertinent every day in my work. My research has given me the ability to predict factors that would likely lead to an on-site incident or issue allowing me to anticipate and remedy issues prior to realisation of the matter. My proactive approach is directly in line with the view of our recently appointed chief executive and is a view that I have shared with the management team on the project.

The BAppMgt further opened my mind to the intricacies of leadership and management. In my study, I covered topics such as *Influencing without Authority*, *Change Management*, *Sustainable Practice* and the *Treaty of Waitangi*.

'*Influencing without authority*' has allowed me to cement my place in the leadership team through knowledge and use of the Cohen-Bradford model (2017) of 'Influence without Authority' recently leading a forum, our health and

safety strategic management group. I have lead the forum in the past but on this occasion challenged our leaders to lift their game in the safety space in an effort to improve our current level of safety using the various tools that I had gleaned from my studies.

During my study in *change Management* I reviewed the models as identified by Mulholland (2017) to identify the various methods and behaviours that would assist in the management of change allowing me to predict and counter behaviours that may be adverse in making necessary changes in my workplace. The writing of Lawrence (1969) and his citation of a study by Coch and French (1948) revealed that there are two critical considerations in change management to be considered: technical change and social change; with social change being the greatest hurdle to any implemented change process. To counter this resistance Coch and French proved that communication and participation were the two best tools to overcome this hurdle, both of which I actively use in my role now when it is necessary to carry out a change process.

Both Lawrence and Mulholland exposed me to new thinking. Lawrence introduced me to the theory of two parts to change; technical and social. I was aware of the technical change factor; but I had not previously considered the social change factor was more relevant to the worker than a technical change. Mulholland reviewed a number of authors in his article, authors such as Lewin, McKinsey, Kotter and Bridge and others. Mulholland's review coupled with the research by Coch and French inspired me to create my own model for the implementation of future change.

Upon Reflection

I recently reviewed both portfolios from my two previous courses of study, the transformation from the first to the second was revealing. The lift in my language was eye-opening, the depth of my research and ability to link that research to discussion to create logical argument has also changed. I had been through the process of knowing what I didn't know.

Both programmes of study have given me tools that I didn't know existed, changing my knowing from what I didn't know to *knowing what I know*. However, I am not satisfied just with what I know now, academic study has opened my curiosity up to worlds that I didn't know existed and piqued my interest to continue asking why and evolving my knowing.

Learning can be a result of conditioning, or reflection allowing cognitive growth. Conditioning or instrumental/operant conditioning of behaviour is best described as learning through repetition, this is a basic human behaviour; ie; that fire is hot, learning our mathematical times table by rote or learning the alphabet. These were learning systems that I had been exposed to all my life. During my time with Capable NZ I have been asked to reflect in my learning, this was a process that I failed to comprehend at first. Then my facilitator introduced me to a paper written by Evelyn Boyd and Ann Fales '*Reflective Learning; Key to learning from experience*' published in the Journal of Humanistic Psychology (1983).

Boyd and Fales, (1983, p. 100), describe the process of reflection as "... the core difference between whether a person repeats the same experience several times, becoming highly proficient at one behaviour or learns from experience in such a way that he or she is cognitively or affectively changed". In the past I would have repeated the same experience to become efficient at one behaviour; I would have had a narrow field of view. I have now learned to reflect on experience in such a way that my field of view is much broader; I consider other opinions and points of view, I look to previous experience to identify milestones in my journey that allow me to identify potential future outcomes. Upon reflection, I have been changed both cognitively and emotionally.

Bolton (2010) in '*Reflective Practice*' (p. 4) wrote: "*Reflection is a state of mind, an ongoing constituent of practice, not a technique or curriculum requirement.*" Bolton further states "*Reflective practice can enable enquiry into; what you know but do not know that you know, and what you do not know and want to know....*" Reflection allows us to draw from our

life experience and blend it with our research and learning to mould our conclusions into well balanced reasoned answers. It challenges our conscious to open up to alternative thinking look deep into ourselves and couple this with the answers that we seek to provide, unbiased, non-prejudiced, depth to our desired outcomes. Within my new MProfPrac learning, I continue to explore reflection in order to stretch and expand my capacity for learning and professional growth.

As identified by Boyd and Fales (1983) a learner can repeat an experience many times and become proficient in that task, that is conditioned learning. Or they may learn from their life experiences through reflection. Reflection promotes cognitive change, allowing the expansion of knowledge.

Throughout my learning journey, I have acknowledged that I need experiences, and as those experiences have grown so has my cognitive response changed. I can now draw from a deeper pool to attain greater knowledge. Cognitive change has become self-perpetuating once I opened myself to the concept.

My work within the graduate diploma in occupational health and safety meant undertaking a project-based piece of work in the workplace, where significant new learning occurred including academic and research capabilities for critique. New learning exposed me to the psychology in decision making processes used by staff and factors that expose our workforce to incidents in the workplace, allowing me to potentially identify latent conditions in staff and the workplace to prevent these incidents.

I then chose to enrol in the BAppMgt as a way to positively impact my management and leadership practice and influence change within my working environment. The challenge for me within this qualification was to find a way to gather my learning, using a reflective process cycle. The BAppMgt provided significant new learning for me; I had previously been a leader for some time and although I had developed a style I had no knowledge of what the construction of my style was. Undertaking this qualification gave my practice substance, and the things I did instinctively a name and theory. In turn my management and leadership style has developed and grown and allows me to provide significant value in my workplace.

Enrolling in my third qualification with Capable NZ, the MProfPrac, is extending my cognitive capabilities, to add further levels of learning including new models and ideas that are my own.

Conditioned learning has been a central theme of my learning historically. However, through integrating reflective practice into my study and my work, I have been challenged to cognitively change both personally and professionally as I complete each stage of my learning. I am motivated to seek deeper enquiry in my ongoing learning journey to achieve higher levels of academic growth and qualifications.

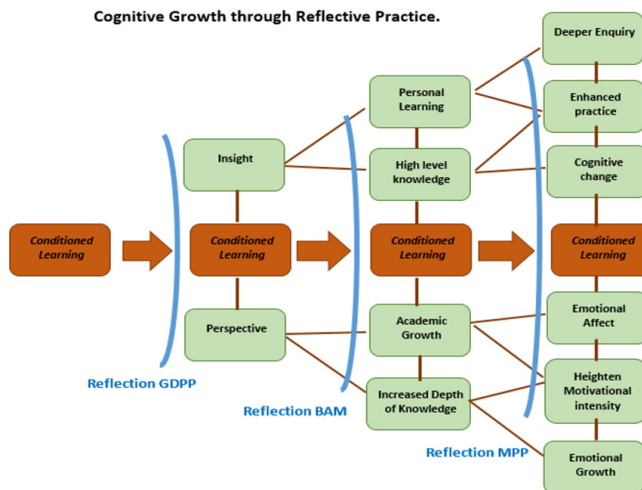


Figure 1. This model is my journey in cognitive growth through reflection, at each stage of my learning I have been cognitively changed. In the past I would simply have relied on my conditioned learning where I have repeated an action until it became an automatic response, this did not challenge or grow me.

The Transformation

The Oxford Living Dictionary (Lexico. n.d) defines transformation as “A marked change in form, nature, or appearance”. My study has changed my form, nature and funnily enough my appearance.

My marked changes include changes in my form, my ability to seek alternative perspective on challenges, to look for depth in argument and to research to provide latitude in my final decisions in my work role. My nature has changed to allow me to foresee issues and bring them to the fore prior to them being realised, I have developed the confidence to raise issues from an informed position. My study has allowed me to take a position at the management table with substance. My appearance has changed in that I present a confident and learned person to the company, my role adds value. My desire to continually learn, improve and develop my personal and professional practice supports my future advancement within the company.

Costley, Elliot and Gibbs (2010) in their book 'Doing Work Based Research - Approaches to Enquiry for Insider-Researchers' state “Work rather than discipline knowledge has become the content and context that shapes learning that results in new skills or insights in the activity of work”. My personal and professional experiences are the essence of my learning, so I have content and context, my study through Capable NZ acknowledges this, but allows me to dive deeply into other people’s shared knowledge in these fields and build a deeper understanding of the meaning of what I do. This is the enlightenment of knowing what I know, the transformation of me in my chosen career.

In Summary

My current study is the third time that I have chosen Capable NZ as my academic learning institution. Why did I do this? Is it personal, or is it personnel? It is both. The style of study has suited me, I like the solitary study concept, I enjoy learning at my own pace, identifying the authors and topics that form the basis of my research. I am able to digest the information and carry out my research at my own speed without the pressure to keep up with my peers. Studying through Capable NZ has also allowed me to continue in my present employment which is important to me at this stage in my life.

Capable NZ paired me with a facilitator who complements my learning style very well. My facilitator has been with me for more than two years now, they have been through many life changes and challenges with me. They have been more than an educator they have been a life coach at the same time. I have changed cognitively and emotionally through my process of learning. As Spielberg says “... mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image ...” Cyrus (2016), and Carreau (2016) states that a mentor allows you to find your own answers. My Capable NZ mentor has challenged me but allowed me to find my own way to give my learning and reflections substance ultimately achieving the qualifications and seeking higher learnings.

*“Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world,
today I am wise so I am changing myself”.*

Rumi 1207-1273 (Juma. n.d)

Although voiced by Michael, this article is a collaboration between learner and mentor

Cushla Donnelly works as a facilitator and academic mentor in Otago Polytechnic, Capable NZ work-based learning and professional practice qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate level. She supports learners to articulate their skills and knowledge gained from their work-based learning experiences. In 2018 Cushla completed her Master Professional Practice (Capable NZ), where she created a model for developing effective self-assessment practice in self-leading teams.

Michael Sarten attained a Post Graduate Diploma in Professional Practice in Occupational Health and Safety, and a Bachelor of Applied Management from Capable NZ, and is currently working towards a Master of Professional Practice. After 28 years of varied front line policing including a role specialising in explosive entry, Michael started a second career as a health and safety professional. He is currently supporting a large Wellington roading project for Fletcher Infrastructure, as Health and Safety Manager. He is an avid boatie, and lives on the sunny Kapiti Coast.

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