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REFLECTIONS ON THE VALUE OF A LEARNER FORUM IN A
MASTER OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE PROGRAMME

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INTRODUCTION

The Master of Professional Practice (MProfPrac or MPP) is a programme based at CapableNZ in the College of Work Based Learning at Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand. The MPP has been delivered since 2012 to individuals who customise the programme to their workplace and carry out research into a chosen area of practice unique to them. The MPP takes 18 months full-time (up to 36 months part-time) across three phases: a review of learning (2 months), the development of a work based research project (6 months), and the delivery of that project (10 months). Each learner has two mentors to support their programme which is positioned in an autoethnographic methodology and has practice transformation as a goal (Otago Polytechnic, 2021).

The programme has predominately been delivered to individuals in isolation from their mentors. In 2017, an online learners forum was piloted to offer a social setting for learning to occur in and the results were encouraging (Henry, 2019). Since then, there have been increasing numbers of learners attending with up to 20 different learners in 2021 and an average of five people attending each forum, held fortnightly. By 2022 ten people are attending each fortnight.

The purpose of the forums as stated in the course handbook (Otago Polytechnic, 2021) is:

- For learners to share their enquiry with peers, so they gain new insights and perspective to their own learning.
- To bring different perspectives to professional and research development.
- For participants to feedback to each other what they notice about what they see in each other's articulation of their work.

The underlying methodology of the MPP is autoethnography (Otago Polytechnic 2021). Autoethnography has been defined as an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis et al., 2010). The context for the MPP is a work-based setting, so the changing professional identity in the workplace is an important component in the MPP. The observations of our facilitators at CapableNZ have indicated that professional identity is transformed during the course of the learners' study, and this study extends this perception to explore in greater depth what the learners have experienced (Carpenter & Ker, 2017).

HOW THIS PAPER IS STRUCTURED

All 2021 forum participants were invited to participate in the preparation of this paper as an author or someone who commented anonymously. In this paper, the Roman text is constructed by the authors. Each author has contributed their reflections on the value of the forum below. Other learner voices who preferred to be

anonymous are in italics. The facilitator then shares his perspective of the value of the forum, followed by a discussion and recommendations for the future. All learner voices in this paper are from learners in full-time professional roles.

LEARNER VOICES ON THE FORUM'S VALUE

Ana Rangi:

I have only attended a few of these but found them beneficial – mainly as a confidence boost and reminder to think really openly about real learning and my own professional practice and development. Working in a university environment I am used to the traditional, formal trappings of academia. High level qualifications (and all they involve) are standard for academics so it's hard not to feel a sense of imposter syndrome when I personally question the real 'value' of some qualifications to professional effectiveness. I have always appreciated CapableNZ's free-er approach that holistically centres you as a practitioner within your context, and values research relevance and its active application to make a difference. While we still work through the traditional skill areas for master's research (lit review, ethics etc.) I don't feel daunted by the technical aspects and process but I'm thinking all the time about my own learning – WHAT I'm learning, HOW I'm learning, and WHY...

Joining the forum allows us to share progress and thoughts with whoever turns up, at whatever stage. We share challenges and are challenged in response. Considering different views and perspectives, we learn from others yet keep self-reflection to the fore. I appreciate the various places (literally and figuratively) we share from in our professional journey and 'walks of life' as individuals. Our conversation reminds me that in an 'iterative process' not everything has an obvious 'purpose,' not to limit my thinking, and to have more confidence. Every forum creates an energy and I always leave feeling more inspired. My mind feels more open to real learning now than it has for a long time.

Deane Patterson:

One can research, theorise, and postulate on paper to their heart's content. But when you must look a roomful (or screenful) of your peers in the eyes, you become keenly aware that you can only speak what you truly believe and think you can prove.

The learner forum is a truth seeker. An 'imposter syndrome' detector. A proving ground. A place where your convictions must face reality and the learner, in turn, must test what they really have the courage to share with people who are willing to (however gently) challenge assumptions and biases.

This forum is vital for reality to be included in a learner's arguments and conclusions. If you can't or won't share it with your peers in a learner forum, is it true to you?

Rebecca Page:

I have been an avid learner for most of my adult life, and this is one of the few times I have had access to a space where I have felt that it was perfectly okay to bring my authentic self to a forum. However I arrived on the day in terms of my MPP journey – ducks in row, or herding cats – was accepted, and welcomed. I found that not only was there support, but more than that, there was space to be vulnerable in what sometimes felt like failure. This has all formed part of a fantastic transformational learning process.

Karen Hocking:

Working full time, self-directed study, attempting to manoeuvre round Moodle, research engines and the narrative in my mind that I am not academic made the first part of my MPP journey a bit overwhelming. There were times I said, I should have just done paint by numbers like my other colleagues and get the work thrown at me.

Being told about the Learners' Forum by the admin team ('cause I would have never found it in Moodle) and making time to join has reminded me what I love about learning with CapableNZ. The Learner Forum is structured in such a way that it allows you to say hi, listen and reflect. Equally participate in a way which really helps you with those blockers and sharing successes. I love the way you can join at any time of your MPP journey, everyone is at different levels, it's what makes it so dynamic. Who needs to go and sit in classes and get material produced for the masses thrown at you. We have a group full of amazing people who are doing their MPPs on so many interesting and diverse subjects.

Steve Jennings:

The MPP Forum has afforded an opportunity to connect with other learners and an opportunity to hear about the different stages of everybody's learning journey. Sharing this journey of new learning with others, especially many years beyond the typical schooling period in my life instils a sense of comfort, and whilst there are obvious benefits of connecting with new people from highly varied backgrounds such as the exposure to different perspectives and industries, the thing that I take the most away from these sessions is the honest vulnerability, this thing that we often paint a mask over in our professional lives which when discussed triggers the reconnection that all of us are still people, imperfectly perfect.

Other learner comments:

The forum has been the most helpful and transformative learning environment I have encountered. In the forum, each participant has rapidly developed confidence and contributes deeply from our respective knowledges collectively weaving a fine basket that in turn enhances our individual baskets. This means I bring more of myself and can observe the effect of this in the exponential trajectory of development in how I consider my research/ future analysis and description of that, and as a practitioner in my profession of three decades.

Being inspired, fortified and encouraged. Feeling a sense of shared community; of thinking of practice and of companionship.

The Forums have given me a sense of community and peer connection – honest and open communication about the trials, tribulations, insights, and excites of my MPP journey.

The MPP forum is a wonderfully rich and complex environment to be lost and found in the inter-relationships between people, ideas and knowledge. It encourages and celebrates the sharing of stories, analogies and metaphors. In this spirit, it challenged me to ask myself: what thoughts are flourishing, which are composting, which are just budding and which are ripe for harvesting into my practice? It is a collaboration that allows us to hold our thoughts out; to give us room to learn from each other, to shift perspectives, humbly and gratefully.

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.

FACILITATOR REFLECTIONS ON THE FORUM

Steve Henry:

Every MPP learner is grappling with complexity; their workplace, their chosen enquiry and the unspoken terror of having the agency to customise their Master's degree to serve them. This can become overwhelming. Everyone deals with the overwhelm differently. Sharing this overwhelm liberates someone from their echo chamber. To say "I don't know" becomes grounding. A place to move from. To witness others in their authenticity seems to lead to the courage to share. Coupled to this, learners have a dilemma, which is largely unspoken; they have more agency than they have ever had in a formal learning programme before. The curriculum is constructed by them with the support of mentors. This dilemma is "disorientating" and opens the possibility of what used to be taken for granted being challenged. When critical reflection and rational dialogue is added to this dilemma, there is potency for transformational perspective shift (Mezirow, 2000). There is something about saying your work out loud to others which changes it. It becomes different to how it is said in the mind. If the dialogue is not rational then it may include deep unconscious patterns (Dirkx et al., 2006). It is these patterns that appear to be coming to the surface from the learners' voices above – surprise and delight that such patterns have legitimacy in a Master's level programme.

From its commencement in 2019, the forums have had a clear structure of a circling method to facilitate the forum. Participants are always invited to share what is alive in our MPP right now? Someone shares and then optional feedback is given using a firm structure, known as the Circling method (Sengstock & Cotton, 2022). After someone shares, others can say what they notice, what they imagine and how they feel about it. These three steps enable the subtle to be honoured (I notice you relaxed as you shared, like a weight was removed). Being able to name what is being projected as a response, is liberating, connecting and increases vulnerability because it carries some risk (I imagine it's relieving to say how stuck you are at this time). To then say how you feel means the observer declares what they are in response to this. They have skin in the game. (I feel sad you are stuck). After such feedback the person who shared begins their response with "On hearing that" This method allows what is being said behind the words to be given voice and the result is often surprising. Even if an observer imposes their projection on someone then this is easily corrected. As this method is used more participants get more courageous to say what they really observe and imagine is going on.

The forum is designed to be transformational for participants. It aligns to the four components of transformational learning facilitation outlined by Apte (2009) which are confirming and interrupting current frames of reference, working with triggers for transformative learning, acknowledging a time of retreat or dormancy, and developing the new perspective. All participants in the forum have without exception felt relieved to have the permission to have one of these aspects deconstructed while being witnessed.

DISCUSSION

The voices point to multiple layers of value. Being witnessed by peers who have some idea of what each person is going through has value. Learners are navigating complexity as they attempt to articulate their practice. Most who complete the MPP are doing deep change work in complex social settings. Such change is hard and often marginalising. The forum design seeks to make watching from the edges acceptable and safe (Henry, 2019). It is a place where inclusion is front and centre, no matter what someone brings – bringing your attention is enough. It is therapeutic to be witnessed by others who can relate. Those who are marginalised, watch from the edges, often feeling belittled, othered, and/or alienated (Berryman et al., 2015). Building a culture of welcoming everything is key to inclusion.

The forum has never involved meeting people physically as all the forums have been held online on Zoom or Teams. Meyers (2008) suggests online courses can effectively use transformative pedagogy, including (1) creating a safe environment; (2) encouraging students to think about their experiences, beliefs, and biases; (3) using teaching strategies that promote student engagement and participation; (4) posing real-world problems that address societal inequalities; and (5) helping students implement action-oriented solutions. All of this happens to varying degrees.

As well as perspective change for participants, there is an aspect of sharing. Nohl (2009) identified the importance of “social recognition” – the recognition of acknowledgement and appreciation as critical for transformative learning to take place. Not knowing what will happen in each forum gives a sense of ease to allow different to usual directions of enquiry to emerge. Spontaneous action may play a decisive role in transformative learning (Nohl, 2009). Throw-away or glib comments may be noticed and brought to the attention of the speaker who sees them in a new light. Unconscious patterns become more visible this way. Participants are not pressured to share, rather they participate on the periphery (Lave & Wenger, 1991) until they are ready to step in further.

Participants at the forum can get emotional – and when they do, it is welcomed. Emotions also are inherently linked to critical reflection, because “purely objective reasoning cannot determine what to notice, what to attend to, and what to inquire about” (Van Woerkom, 2010, p. 248). Enabling such reflection is the intent of the design of the MPP and the forum.

Forum participants become increasingly empathetic to each other the more time they spend in the forum. Stuckey et al. (2013) suggest scholars have overlooked the role empathy plays in engaging the emotive nature of transformative learning. MPP learners care immensely about the context they are in and the change they seek – yet they are asked to deconstruct and reconstruct something they might discover is different to what they expected. Seeing others do this in the forum is a relief as they can see their own pattern expressed in another. It is empathy that provides the learner with the ability to identify with the perspectives of others, lessens the likelihood of prejudice, increases the opportunity for identifying shared understanding, and facilitates critical reflection through the emotive valence of assumptions (Stuckey et al., 2013).

The forum meets the criteria for fostering transformational learning design in an educational setting, outlined by Taylor and Jarecke (2011), placed in relation to the core elements of critical reflection, group dialogue, individual experience and an awareness of context:

- a purposeful and heuristic process
- confronting power
- engaging difference
- an imaginative process
- leading learners to the edge
- fostering reflection, and
- modelling.

Being stuck when undergoing complex learning requires a range of methods to support movement. The forum is one such vehicle. Schnepfleitner and Ferreira (2021) eloquently summarise the dilemma:

Perhaps without realising it, we are all trapped within and moulded by our meaning perspectives and therefore we can never make an interpretation of our individual experience free from bias. It is only by exposing our ideas or experiences to critical reflection and dialogue and comparing them to the lived experiences of others that we can begin to uncover those biases or reassure ourselves of their objectivity.

With 75 learners in the MPP programme, there is potential for more participation in a forum that appears to have significant value for those who participate.

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