THIS LEARNER'S IDENTITY – LOST, FOUND, OR SIMPLY CONFUSED?
IN SEARCH OF A DEFINITIVE IDENTITY

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TEAM OF ONE

I can change, pivot, spin, realign, adjust, re-focus—do them all;
the words matter less than the thinking and actions connecting them.
My theoretical learning has taught these lessons; real life reinforced them—
as worker, manager, and leader, in offices and in factories,
as facilitator of learning experiences on campus and trainer for corporates.
Does this make me some sort of genuine hotshot Super Person?
A knower of all that is fabulous and empowering for others?
Or am I simply reacting to circumstances as best I can?
I work and learn at distance, in a world of aloneness
connected to the world by Zooms and Teams and various other media.
Is the real me the one on somebody's screen?
The one who's super nice and bites his tongue?
Or is he the hidden one afraid to really let it out,
my identity not the same as if I was really there?
Am I nicer online than I would be in person?
Because I wear multiple hats my identity fits the circumstantial needs,
the mindset adjustments collective; the challenges at the same time individual.
Institutions are challenged to rethink if they serve systems or people.
Does form still guide function, or has function triumphed at last?
When can I stop endlessly searching for a comfortable single identity
and accept I am simply making contingency planning "book theory" real?
Must I constantly invent the new to replace yesterday's old ways?
Will innovative revolution always outperform an evolution equally as brave?
They are not some magic identities I have yet to reach,
they are the journey I travel; indeed, have always travelled,
the outcomes of my decisions every day, reflecting on my learnings.
My journey will never end, my professional identity will always evolve,

my thoughts and actions adjusted to my circumstances now and ahead,

being adaptable, encouraging, empowering,

challenging, creative, resilient – my normal daily behaviour

marrying past knowledge and lived experience with care for my learners

with care for myself and desire to truly give my best.

Another day and challenges have been met – bring on the next.

Maybe tomorrow will be the day that I accept

having multiple identities is not a bad thing

that there is more to be learned from them in collaboration

than in thinking I must be one identity or the other—

Together Each (of me) Achieves More.

INTRODUCTION

To address the question of what my identity means in a work-based learning context for me both as a learner and a learning practitioner, I have chosen a figurative autoethnographic camera and a series of lenses to document my experiences as I search for meaning and relevance as a Vocational Education and Training (VET) practitioner and learner. The first is a poetic inquiry lens (Hoben, 2021), chosen in an attempt to capture my inner thoughts about who and what I am, coupled with a heart-full filter (Ellis, 1999) to capture my evocative experience. The second is a subjective academic narrative lens (Arnold, 2015), selected for its ability to reveal fictional truth (Arnold, 2010) in the overall picture that might otherwise not come as sharply into focus.

Poetic inquiry—specifically, autoethnographic poetry—allows me to construct meaning (Lahman et al., 2010) from my lived experiences, teasing out key thoughts worthy of further reflection, to which I can add more detailed reflection on lived experiences as data (Wiebe, 2015). What is important is that the voice is mine and the content relevant to me (Newman, 2019), because that is where the value lies when I plan for future growth.

I will examine this process through two different lenses, each of which is a part of my search for meaning. The first is through my current role as a facilitator of diploma and degree-level management and leadership learning in an online environment. The second is through my current role as a doctoral-level learner, where I am re-creating myself as a critical learning outcome.

AS A LEARNING FACILITATOR

For most of my career as a facilitator, I have worked in a face-to-face (F2F) environment. The time and place for formal learning sessions are fixed, as are some of the synchronous learning activities (Iowa State University, n.d.). I have never been a fan of rote learning, preferring instead to take more of a co-creational approach in which learners become partners in a shared learning enterprise. While much of my practice has been with cohorts working as smaller teams on discrete projects, the context for these tasks has been established via whole-class co-creation of an appropriate knowledge base (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), where the process can be tailored around an appropriate combination of theoretical approaches (Wilson, 2018). I can adjust my theoretical emphasis based on my 'read of the room' because all of the participants are sharing the same physical space and time with me—I can observe and respond appropriately based on the range of cues I am being presented with (Knight, 2018; Lemonis, n.d.).

Now I am working in a computer-mediated learning environment where content is delivered via the internet, and interactions between myself and my learners are largely via email (IGI Global, n.d.), and occasionally through the likes of Microsoft Teams. This means the learning is asynchronous—different learners engaging with the course content at times which fit the unique combination of their learning needs and lifestyle constraints (Scheiderer, 2021). While there are facilities for learners to engage with me using a range of different channels, there is no requirement for them to do so at all if they choose not to.

What I feel I have had to accept as a constraint in my current circumstances is that relationships with learners whom I never meet are going to be different to what I have been used to forming in the F2F environment. To me, this is not something that needs to be worked around, because online/distance delivery is the organisation's business—there is not going to be a return to a different model at a later point in time. What I need to make is a straight-out adjustment to my thinking about my role. I am no longer simply a provider of marks and feedback on assessments after the fact, I am a guide on the journey through assessments and into the world beyond. Because the likes of Zoom and Teams are not being used for student interactions with my courses, it is only through my written interactions and the very occasional phone call that I am able to project critical persona elements by coming across as approachable and interested in them (Barile, n.d.) that resembles what they would experience F2F.

To achieve what needs to be achieved—in line with the organisation's stated and real objectives—there are several additional adjustments this reflective lens reveals to me that will contribute to my greater satisfaction with how I am performing the role, positively impacting the relationships I have with my learners:

- Sharing relevant personal experiences. My pre-facilitating career has spanned a diverse range of industries and organisations, giving me an equally diverse collection of experiences from which to draw when it comes to demonstrating how learners can translate the theories they are learning to situations they may be more familiar with (Martin, 2019). Stories can excite interest in a topic that might otherwise not have existed (Baines & Healy, 2021), acting to provide structure for remembering course material (Green, 2004) in ways where the narrative connects with some aspect of the learner's lived experience, as well as a connection with me as the story sharer.

- Focusing on providing encouragement in every interaction. Recognising that direct, spontaneous interaction opportunities will be fewer than in a F2F environment, I believe it is important to review how I am communicating my course expectations for us as a cohort, especially when we are working with content that has been created by third parties (Martin, 2019). From my own experience as a distance learner, I have felt a much stronger connection with facilitators who have created a personal video introducing themselves rather than a page of text, or those who have held live sessions to deal with burning questions. Helping my learners to develop a more comprehensive understanding of who I am as a facilitator (Draus et al., 2014) can also go some way towards understanding who I am as a person outside of that specific context, helping learners to create a connection with me that is both broader and deeper than would be otherwise be possible.

The importance of creating a human relationship with my learners as a facilitator is an important part of the collaborative learning journey we are all taking. The adjustments I have outlined in this section, however, only go part way towards enabling me to become the most effective version of myself. Adding to these, I must also reflect on myself as a learner, because those experiences remind me what it is like to be taking the journey from the other side.

As I look back at the story I have shared here about how I operate, I am drawn to the work of Smit et al. (2010), and their thoughts on the struggles teachers face both in and around teaching, and how I construct my professional identity based on feedback from diverse sources. Tensions constantly exist between the various views informing my identity (Pillen et al., 2013). Moderating the tensions is my need to be authentic to myself in how I apply my mix of lived experiences and formal learning to both manage and lead learning experiences for my learners (McKenzie, 2012).

AS A DOCTORAL LEARNER

Having to work almost entirely online is simply the reality of being a distance learner.

If I expected my doctoral journey to stretch me beyond limits I had not previously pushed, I have not been disappointed. It has taken me into mental spaces that I knew existed in theory; but had not experienced in practice. There are so many rabbit-holes I could disappear down in this section, each of them important in its own context, but the one I will discuss is loneliness. As I reflect back on four and a half years (at the time of writing) on the Doctor of Professional Practice journey, I would characterise it as one of the loneliest experiences of my life.

I work at home. I learn at home. The 'commute' between my place of sleep and my place of work and learning is six steps door-to-door—I know, because I counted every one of them. Sometimes it might be eight or nine steps if I have to sidestep around our cat. My work world is about 15 square metres of physical space, two computer screens and an internet connection. I rarely meet any of my fellow learners in person and, being half-way up-country from where my academic mentors are based in Dunedin, I rarely meet anybody to whom I 'report' in person. Inglorious isolation is where I exist, and yet it is not where I want to be.

It still surprises me that I write about not wanting to be isolated because, for a long time, I considered myself to have strong introversion tendencies, someone who was happier reflecting in the background and working independently (Petric, 2019). Such a view, however, is not consistent with my role as a learner-facing educator and trainer of over 20 years' experience. Grant (cited in Bradberry, 2016) identifies a number of critical questions that may give some indication of an individual's ambiversion potential. Options to choose from cover each end of the introversion-extroversion spectrum, such as preferences for working independently versus collaboratively, and the degree to which an individual enjoys being the centre of attention, to the balance of time spent alone versus in company.

In a face-to-face, classroom-based situation, I can be strongly extroverted, drawing energy from the audience I am interacting with, working in ways that are consistent with Blanchard's situational leadership model (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009, p. 63) as a way of achieving outcomes collaboratively. On reflection, I find I also use elements of Fiedler's Contingency Model, matching my leadership style to the situation (McShane et al., 2013, p. 390). In other words, my doing and my learning occur in real time, face-to-face interactions, because I am an inherently social animal.

The communication that happens in face-to-face interactions tends to be both more interactive and filled with a richness of cues to meanings that either are not there or are easily missed in online meetings (Honeycutt, 2017; Krause, 2022). Balanced against this, however, I find myself experiencing a diminished sense of shared purpose and disenchantment (Breslau & Ramseur, 2021). I have more regular interactions with our cat than anybody connected with my project and, while there are times that talking issues through with Snowy The Cat has helped me to find answers (or, at least, possibilities) I was looking for, those interactions are not the same as interactions with project-connected humans.

With very few deep and meaningful connections to project-connected humans, it is perhaps inevitable that I have questioned who the authentic me really is. I have to be more than somebody who sits in front of two screens all day, reads a lot, thinks a lot, and sometimes writes stuff. I have objectified myself (Rashid & Brooks, 2021) as this person called 'Doctoral Learner (Remote)' and found pain in that process because somehow, I am not enough. The lack of recognition of, and engagement with who I am and what I am achieving is connected in my own mind to the lack of regular interaction with project-connected people.

How to assuage this pain? Through something entirely disconnected from my doctoral project—See (Camera) Time/Me Time. This self-care concept, borrowed from a friend's Doctor of Professional Practice project, allows

me to take advantage of the flexibility I have in my schedule by blocking out regular time each week (Hannigan, 2021) to focus on photography. Prioritising these moments of pleasure (Finch, 2020) I have taken this from a pastime to a serious hobby. When I am in that photography space, this is what I also refer to as my "photographic mindfulness time," where I am intentionally living in that moment without judgement, in order to manage my emotions and bring about a state of calmness, and general sense of well-being (Birtwell et al., 2019; Pepping et al., 2016). Nothing else exists in that time except the challenge of capturing the images I have in my mind's eye.

On a semi-regular basis, I chat on social media with other friends (Vermes, 2020) in the doctoral journey space "beyond business" (Finch, 2020), both in this country and overseas. We look out for each other (Hannigan, 2021) simply because that is what friends do, even though I have physically met only those in this country. Sometimes it is nice to know that there is somebody I can talk to outside of my immediate household who has either lived, or is currently living, the same sorts of issues I am. I do not expect them to solve my problems, because that is something I need to do. Sometimes the process of having the conversations does not create the solutions; it merely exposes them.

CONCLUSION

As a practitioner and facilitator of collaborative learning for more than two decades, an important part of my work has been to train learners in how to think (rather than what to think). To think of possibilities. To not allow the past, or even the present, to define what the future could look like. To construct their identities from the experiences they live, and to be authentic to themselves.

The reflection I have engaged in to tell my story here has reminded me of the importance of living the advice I have shared with so many others. It has also reminded me that my two identities as facilitator and learner may never fully become one. I have come to accept that there will always be tension between elements of the two different identities. While education is the domain which unites them, it is the roles which separate them. At best, each will inform the growth of the other, and perhaps I simply need to accept that I have two related but not mirror image identities.

Rob Nelson trained as a printer, worked his way into management, later qualifying in management and then leadership as an adult student. He then embarked on a second career teaching management, and has significant experience in collaborative Project-Based Learning.

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