

LONG TERM VALUE: DOES THE LEARNING BEGUN DURING THE CAPABLE PROCESS CONTINUE BEYOND GRADUATION?

Lindsay Smith, Tracey Wright-Tawha and Josh Koia

Learners who embark on the year-long Capable NZ pathway of study for an undergraduate degree usually have a clear expectation of the value of the qualification they will achieve. But for some, what they gain is far more valuable than a qualification; they better understand themselves and take empowerment from that knowledge. This case study investigates the added value which can result from learners' significant self-reflection.

By definition, students using the Capable option will already have significant experience in their chosen career but, in many cases, have decided to gain their first tertiary qualification for employment related reason. During the panel assessment process which completes the Capable NZ programme, when asked to describe their reason for beginning the study, learners will frequently point to an issue which triggered the need for action. It may have been dissatisfaction with their current position, a vision of a higher level career or a concern at their ability to compete against younger, more qualified job applicants in their industry. Recurrent restructurings, corporate take-overs and constant changes leave many mid-level managers feeling at risk without formal qualifications and they plan to use the Capable process to add a recognised and accepted label to their undocumented years of experience.

But while the need for formal, independent recognition to present to existing and future employers may have been the primary motivation for the majority of learners, during the assessment a significant proportion talk of the added benefits they discovered during the process. For the last seven years I have sat on Capable NZ Assessment Panels and heard learners frequently tell of the deeply personal experience which came from reflecting on their lives and the new things they learned. They are able to gain affirmation by placing their own experiences within established theoretical frameworks; they excitedly discuss academic readings which have pushed their boundaries, and can point to a new level of understanding of the major influences and influencers which impacted their personal and professional lives.

As the each assessment ends, with detailed feedback from the panel members, as an assessor you cannot help but wonder at the longer term value of their new qualification for the learner and the impact of their degree on the employment and personal expectations they had months ago when they began. In order to get a very simple answer to this complex question, two successful learners were interviewed and agreed to share their experiences by contributing to this paper.

Even a short period after their assessment, both were very clear that had found another perspective to their success; one not evident to them even on assessment day. Tracey Wright-Tawha and Josh Koia were two quite different candidates for under-graduate degrees. Tracey worked through the Capable programme last year to achieve a Bachelor of Applied Management majoring in Māori Organisational Leadership and Josh completed his Bachelor of Social Services earlier this year. But while their degrees are very different, their underlying passions for improving their communities are very similar. Tracey uses her position as founder and CEO of a large health service provider as her platform for action and Josh bases his community work on his significant creative talents, but both go to work each day to make life better for those who are important to them.

And both began their childhood with a similar experience of New Zealand's traditional primary and secondary education and struggled to connect to expectations of a structured and teacher-centric view of the world. Tracey explained she couldn't wait to leave school and "get on with it". Her two passions at school were art and social studies but she couldn't relate to the text-book approach to these subjects. "If I was to learn about Spain then I wanted to go there and experience it, she said. "I was bright at school but certainly never thought I was clever enough to go on to university and do anything academic."

Josh also struggled through school and a series of bad associations and personal decisions led to him being expelled long before he was ready to leave in terms of qualifications or emotional maturity. Both point to out-of-school mentors being far more influential at that time than any classroom teaching. Tracey's grandfather had a track record of business success and she talked fondly of hands-on lessons in stock-control, sales and book-keeping learned before she had reached her teens. Over the intervening years Tracey had leveraged these early business beginnings into the creation of a significant health organisation which employs over 50 staff and delivers 50,000 service interactions each year.

Josh remembered a specific youth worker who gave him the confidence to see the good and creative within himself and the hands-on skills to bring out these abilities for the benefit of others. Since that early beginning, Josh has unfolded his creative talents as a poet, musician and artist and added practical skills in youth work. By combining these factors he has been able to build award winning programmes which aim to replicate his own learning journey in similarly troubled young people.

However Josh had come to recognise the limitations of practical experience as a lever into more professional roles and the greater opportunities to make a difference these offer. "For years I thought I was stupid, Josh explained, "but I decided that I had to spend four years at university to get the qualifications I needed if I was going to get ahead." When Josh talked to a friend who had been through the Capable process, he was excited to learn that his practical experience could be used as an alternative to the classroom.

Recognition of her professionalism was also an important driver of Tracey's decision to study. As her organisation took on increasingly challenging health and social objectives, she acknowledged the importance of her own mana as CEO to her whanau and to the funding agencies which make her services possible. She was also conscious of the need to be a role model to her own children and like Josh was excited to learn that she could achieve her objectives without the need for classroom study.

"But once I got started it was like someone had lit a fire", she said and Josh agreed. "Capable gave me a real hunger to learn." Both credit their facilitators with igniting their passions for study thanks to their learner-centred approach, so different to the teaching methods they had experienced at school. "It wasn't about being right or wrong, Tracey explained. "I was asked to reflect on how I had formed my thinking, who had influenced me and found the whole process very reaffirming and empowering." And Josh repeats the word empowering to describe his experience and explained, "It was good to know what all those things I had done meant something and wouldn't go to waste."

While these personal experiences were evident at the end of the assessment process both Tracey and Josh have been surprised at their on-going learning since the Capable process has been completed. "By digging deep, I have learned a lot about myself, Josh said. My portfolio was very transparent and showed the authentic me. The Capable study made me stop procrastinating and challenge myself and I also found it made me realise how much I don't know."

But looking back, after the assessment ended, Josh is clear that he has come to a personal crossroads and needs to set new goals. At the end of his panel assessment Josh was surprised to learn that he had passed but since then, has finally given himself permission to recognise his own talents, achievements and successes. His new found belief in his academic ability and "hunger" for a higher level of professional engagement has seen him begin

a search for a new role within an organisation with a greater influence on community outcomes. It is only a few weeks since he completed his qualification, and Josh has yet find the position he seeks, but his enthusiasm for his future as a change-maker is exciting to watch.

For Tracey the ongoing impact of the original study is obvious at one level; she has now begun studying for a Masters qualification. However, even Tracey is astonished at the deeper level changes which have occurred. The crossroad symbol also reflects Tracey's post-study understandings but in her case it's a realisation of her role linking her Māori Whānau on one side of the cross with the business world-view on the other and her ability to stand across both worlds. Her assessment presentation and portfolio of evidence contained a unique model of care using the Poha, a traditional food storage basket, as a symbol of how everyone needed to work together to create successful health outcomes. She contrasted this care structure with complex examples of the business tools she used to manage the operational side of her organisation.

But subsequent to the completion of her bachelor's qualification, Tracey has come to accept her role in linking these worlds of whānau and business. "Within the Māori framework there is a real focus on collective decision-making she said, and in the past I accepted that was the way things are done and had let my work speak for itself. But this journey of discovery has given me the self-belief and the understanding to see that sometimes I need to stand outside the collective and express my point of view, even when it is different from those around me.

"That means our discussions can be far more robust. If we want to consider aspirational goals 10, 20, 30 years into the future we need to be able to do things differently and this process has given me the courage to speak out when that's what is needed".

Both Tracey and Josh achieved their original goal by passing their first, formal tertiary qualification; the first in Josh's family ever to do so. And by the time they completed the assessment they had both gained a better understanding of the links between their practical experience and the wider academic world and were able to use that knowledge to improve their professionalism.

But both have been surprised at how the learning has continued at a very personal level. When they frequently refer to the Capable programme and process as being empowering, they mean that quite literally. Reflecting on what they have achieved, both have a new found sense of their own value, experience and contribution and both are using that knowledge to operate at a level well above the limitations they had earlier given themselves. It would seem that the real benefit of their qualifications is not how others now see them but how they now see themselves.

As Assessors who facilitate the final, formal stage of the Capable NZ process, we need to clearly understand our role. While we certainly have a responsibility to ensure the learner's evidence meets the requirements of the graduate profile, we have a wider opportunity to aid the learner on their post-graduation voyage of self-discovery. Only by doing that, do we give them the real value of their Capable experience; personal empowerment which can be used drive the actions needed to give effect to their passions.

Lindsay Smith is a CAPABLE NZ Assessor with expertise in Business Administration, Social Policy, Educational Assessment. He was Business Manager at Ashburn Clinic (2006-13) and Regional Operations Manager for Land Information (1997-2006).

Tracey Wright-Tawha is CEO and founder of Nga Kete Matauranga Pounamu Charitable. She has a Bachelor of Applied Management (Māori Organisational Leadership) with distinction and is currently studying for a Master of Professional Practice at Otago Polytechnic.

Josh Koia is a Youth Worker and graduated from Otago Polytechnic with a Bachelor of Social Services.