

ODE TO AN EDUCATOR, WORK BASED LEARNER AND CHANGE AGENT

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Part I

Solving real problems with skills learned elsewhere
The capstone project is the proof of learning
The capstone project is the proof of application
The real **evidence** learners can collaborate and grow

No more learning only to neglect all later
The assignments and exams – all done and forgotten
Knowledge so painstakingly gained, tossed to the wind
Its relationship to real life only fleetingly perceived

On what foundation have I built this expectation?
Is it a proof base, or is it convenience?
After all the teams I've seen implode
I should know enough to avoid this road

Forming a team must be so easy – NO!
Please sir, can you do it for us?
We've never had to do it for ourselves
We don't want the wrong people with us

Nothing could be worse than the wrong people...

The problem is not us – it is them
We can get along with anyone at all
We are adults – we always behave that way
There is no problem that we cannot solve

Graduate Profile, Course Prescription – must collaborate
they say
Your team of peers you get to choose
Sell yourselves you must – tell the real truth
Any particular team choice not guaranteed – sell well

The choice is made, the die is cast
It's up to you to make this work
Standard Operating Procedures – rules to live by next
Negotiate them, make them operable – they are yours

The project is chosen – full speed ahead now
You have formed, you have stormed, even normed
You are invincible – what could possibly go wrong?
Claims from the start don't match performance now

Human foibles come out to play every day
It's not me, not us – it is them!
They wrote and signed the rules with us
Now they won't obey – not even a bit!

We want them out, we want them gone
No matter how hard WE try, THEY fail
The better our work, the worse theirs gets
We cannot make this work, not at all

Like all good stories, this has two sides
THEIR expectations are unreal, THEIR support never there
We asked for help, but got only scorn
We can't do it; can't afford to fail

Like a saviour in battered armour, help arrives
Sometimes asked, sometimes not, but **always** willingly given
I've been right here so many times before
Will this team be the one that's different?

If I had any doubts, I would not try
Just let them implode, let them hate away
And then tell boss "Painful way to learn"
People damaged, maybe destroyed, but learning objectives
met...

I will not abandon them in time of need
I know too well where my responsibilities lie
If they only learn to depend on me
I have failed them, and also failed me

On my shoulders lie so many heavy loads
So many stakeholders have invested belief in me
That what I told them is absolutely true
“No matter what – I am here for you”

To help people voice out is a must
The less I know, the harder to help
I still must *earn* your trust you see
You must experience I will listen to everyone

Do you want a listening ear or a decider?
What do your rules allow me to do?
You cannot win if things stay as are
Conflict is so frustrating, although invaluable learning comes

I've read your rules, listened to you all
There is some wrong, there is some right
I can **help** you solve this problem now
If you are willing to work with me

If you depend only on me, we failed
You have not learned to resolve conflict **yourselves**
You have not appreciated how negative becomes positive
You have not understood **your** wisdom and power

The best resolution is one **YOU** created
You will believe in it more than mine
The process is what you created yourselves
I only guided from my knowledge and experience

Remember what you've done, and how it happened
What it felt like in mind and heart
You have done what once you thought impossible
Hold fast to this knowledge, precious beyond compare

Not every team will experience such negative conflict
For others – not a care in the world
Every challenge is met, every goal is achieved
Harmony abounded, but how much did they learn?

Have they learned more or less than others?
Do they **KNOW** why negative conflict avoided them?
Was it something they did, or only luck?
But most of all – could they repeat it?

The project has run its course; solutions delivered
The marks have been awarded, the prizes too
The institution is happy, Project Sponsor as well
Little do they know the price we paid...

For the learners the experience is finished now
They have survived, they have grown – it's over!
They never have to live this experience again
Their collaborative lessons learned are ones for life

Some race to forget; others promise to remember
Some memories will stay with a learner forever

Remembered with varying degrees of clarity and depth
A foundation to guide future decisions and actions

Did your experience go beyond mandated course outcomes?
Not by my design, but by your choices
Have you emerged stronger because of what happened?
You are more experienced to graduate with confidence

What of your life once graduation is done?
The real world is not like a textbook
People don't always behave in predictable, logical ways
You've experienced them at their best and worst

You've had to deal with every strange behaviour
Trying to respect the person different to you
Trying to understand the person they really are
Keeping sight on the project, not forgetting that

At the start, you thought the course impossible
It required things you knew you couldn't do
Now at the end, how effective are you?
Employers want to know; point to your project

“What you see didn't exist before our team
Let me tell you about the part I played
How I led, managed, encouraged, empathised, and supported
How I will show how effective I am”

If you want someone who really backs themselves
Capable and sound, driven but yet still human
Someone who can see holistically, also act independently
I'm your best candidate. When do I start”?

Part 2

All things equal, the learner does this once
Soon they will forget my name and face
But each next trimester; I do it again
Each new cohort, the same lessons to learn

The same process to use, same challenges to face
True, incremental changes made, based on previous
experiences
While I've evolved the process, I haven't checked in
With the Number One Person facilitating the experience

Insidious and unappreciated, my passion my potential burnout
I joke about this with each new lot
“For an effective strategy, Do As I Say
Do NOT Do As I Do (unless necessary)”

Your project is important; not your whole life
Know when to step out, take a break
Go and smell the sunshine whenever you need
Working with no breaks – not recommended (unless
unavoidable)”

I'm not superhuman; should have taken my advice
Should have been able to apply my own lessons
I've a mission you see, important to me
To develop and grow next generation problem solvers

Did my passion blind me? Maybe it did
I never "turned off", always focused on projects
Holistic, collaboratively worked (and assessed where possible) experiences
Empathising with my learners, but never with me

Was I a "Legend In My Own Mind"?
Did my multiple awards mean anything at all?
Did I expect far too much from myself?
Could I make the course what it **should** be?

Fast forward now to the adventure called DPP
Where, at last, I have my greenfield site
Freedom, encouragement to think beyond the conventional constraints
To create not a course but **an experience**

To apply my passion, know how, and creative flair
To redefine what is possible – because it is
To build on the best from the past
To imagine, inspire, guide, consult, evolve as necessary

I should take my own advice to reflect
That action without reason is most often poor
But when is the best time for this?
It depends whose expert view you love most

Schön and Mezirow have taught me to reflect
Before I do a thing – will it work?
When I am in the middle of the action?
Or when it's all over and outcomes achieved?

The lessons I learn from valid experiences had
Some will be "good", others will be "bad"
I must record them in some permanent form
Their maximum value lies beyond this one context

What has been taught is what I've learned
Our shared collaborative experience – different but similar
You taught me as much as I you
What I create is your legacy as well

But between us still lies one crucial difference...

You were "students" and this was still "school"
Project thinking was always part time for you
It mattered not a bit what I did
"School projects" would never be your "Number One"

You wondered at my passion, you really did
Sometimes you probably thought I'd lost the plot
Why so intense – why not chill out a little?
Like the Blues brothers, I'm on a mission

Part 3

To integrate into a holistic, realistic learning experience
From whoa to go, people and project indivisible
Capturing the serendipity and magic of collaboration
On a scale not commonly done – although possible

Where my mission ends, I am not sure
Perhaps it has no end; goes on evermore
As long as learners must know of collaboration
Experience it in practice, not just in theory

A sobering thing, to think of my legacy
To pay it forward, in present and future
In gratitude for the many experiences I've shared
The great, the disappointing, even those that hurt

Some told me I could not do this
It wasn't needed; I wasn't good enough
There were times when I believed those words
When I let them beat me down (repeatedly)

They hurt me more than I let them see
I would not give them that sad pleasure
Deep within me, well hidden, lay my conviction
That I still had value, something to contribute

My mahi now on a much wider stage
Practitioner, learner – the line between roles has blurred
At once I am both; my being torn
I belong in both worlds, yet in neither

The imposter syndrome against which I do battle
'Justified' by my coloured perceptions of past events
Some days the imposter wins, some days me
I have been through too much to capitulate

My mission is greater than me the individual
The black dog of depression who haunts me
Released through the reflective exercise called the ROL
He shall not claim the victory he doesn't deserve

This critical mission is no longer mine alone
It is a collaboration – it is **us, we**
What I have conceived, now shared with others
I am one voice, but can lead korero

My eyes and ears opened to new possibilities
Many things I could never have dreamed alone
The challenge excites me; I am accepted here
The belief and encouragement of others supports me

Yes, I have hurt and I have grown
Our strength lies in our diversity and collaboration
You have not made me, any of you
You have shaped me, every one of you

I am you, you are me, we are we
Collaborative learning and collaboratively assessed projects
our shared passion
If I have learned one transformational thing so far
It is this: I am truly part of we

Together **we** will achieve more than I ever could
You are my soul mates, my mentors, my friends
In your company I am permitted and expected to
Challenge convention, provoke disobedient thoughts and
incite rebellious actions

All in the sacred cause of experiential learning
My comfort zone has become elastic – nay, dynamic
I have found space filled with like minds
I have come home...

KEY THEMES WOVEN THROUGH THE ODE

Having established the foundations of my collaborative Work-Based Learning journey thus far through verse, I'm now going to consider, in more detail, two critical themes both inherently and explicitly woven through it:

- change agency; and
- reflection through an autoethnographic lens.

My own Doctor of Professional Practice (DProfPrac or, informally, as above, 'DPP') journey started long before enrolling in the qualification. I moved from being a learner engaging with a course that is "Project Management" by another name, but with a significant focus on the development of leadership (self and others) skills in a collaborative context (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2002; New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2018), to facilitating the same course. Having experienced the course from both sides has equipped me with the *knowledge* to be an effective change agent. It has also given me much to reflect on, which has inevitably found its way into other courses I have facilitated. The value of the learning has thus been multiplied many times over and benefitted a wider range of stakeholders both within and outside the teaching institution.

CHANGE AGENCY

A change agent is defined as "...the individual or group that undertakes the task of initiating and managing change in an organization..." (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 1). This is a fairly typical definition of the term, to which it is possible to add other factors such as uncovering the causes of problems (Pascale & Sternin, 2005), creation of a positive and integrative environment for change (van den Berg et al., 2019), collaboration (van der Heijden et al., 2015), the provision of technical knowledge and social support (McKinsey & Company, 2017), and minimising the resistance to change (Gupta & Singla, 2021). Whether they come from inside or outside the organisation, their role is to change the thinking and behaviour of individuals **inside the organisation** to some defined and desired state (Govindarajan, 2020).

When I went literally from being a student on a Friday to a teacher the following Monday, this last point was one that I taught in my various management courses. It was not reflective of how I saw myself. My students were customers of my organisation, but they did not belong to it in the same way I did as an employee. A

change agent might manipulate me as an employee towards my employer's desired future state, but surely that was different to what I was doing with my students who would go on to be employed by many different organisations who were not hiring me as an external change agent.

It took some little time to appreciate that, as a teacher, I was – **I am a change agent**. This agency manifests itself in several critical ways:

- seeking to bring about change in the institution and the systems I have to work within to facilitate co-creating more authentic learning experiences;
- seeking to bring about change in commercial and non-commercial organisations by graduating learners who are not only capable of solving a diverse range of problems, but who are also capable of working collaboratively to do so;
- seeking to bring about change in individuals via increased self-efficacy when it comes to working collaboratively with others, whether in a leadership or followership role.

Bolam (1975, as cited in Badley, 1986) identified a number of specific roles played by a change agent in terms of what they deliver to the people who are the subject of the change process. In training people to collaborate, an essential skill for management of selves and others in a capstone project that exists mostly in the world outside the classroom, I would add other critical roles to Bolam's list:

- counsellor – being invited into learners' lives, sometimes outside the context of their project team, to help resolve issues negatively impacting their ability to take an effective part in their project teams;
- conflict manager – sometimes as a “court of last resort” where learners believed themselves unable to resolve intra-team and inter-team issues without external guidance.

A study by Stewart et al. (2018) found that, as much as process failures could be blamed for project failure, so could competence failures. Many of the cultural issues they highlighted revealed not only technical failures, but also failures of individuals to engage collaboratively within and across discipline areas. My own practice, therefore, has been to develop a culture within capstone cohorts that is essentially learner-centred, where I become a guide and facilitator rather than the authoritative fount of all knowledge they may have expected from a tutor.

Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2005) identified the ability to work collaboratively to solve problems as an important outcome of project and problem-based learning scenarios. They further identified that such an approach actually required more rather than less tutor time being invested in a cohort to achieve desirable outcomes. It is not only the desire or willingness of the facilitator to deliver such a collaborative learning experience on its own that determines likely outcomes – as a change agent I must also work to change institutional systems such that the institution does not take this extra workload for granted and are instead able to meaningfully support it.

It is sometimes said of bureaucracies that it is easier to do something and ask for forgiveness later than to plan something and ask for permission. As a change agent, this is something I must be mindful of. Some boundaries are easier to push and more flexible than others. What I must never lose sight of, though, are the responsibilities I have to diverse stakeholder groups to ensure that authentic learning is not only relevant now, but also future-proofing as much as is practical *participants in, and other beneficiaries of* the learning experience. This leads to the second interwoven key theme: reflection on what happens and what the outcomes are.

REFLECTION THROUGH AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC LENS

The autoethnographic lens enables me to see the world on my own terms; to be the hero of my own narrative, or the villain should that be appropriate. The distinction is important – I am forced to confront my own fallibility, my own 'normal human-ness' on a regular basis. As much as I like to think that my judgements are based on some sort of Mister Spock-like logic, I must acknowledge the role that emotion plays, consciously or otherwise. Buckley (2015) points out the need for beliefs about emotional influence to be triangulated – the difficulty as a practitioner is that my learners may not choose to reflect on the same events that I have reflected on. Add to that their reflections being produced as assessment pieces and not being perceived by them as part of an ongoing professional development strategy, and I must accept my reflections are likely to contain bias that cannot be easily countered.

A critical skill for an educator to develop as part of continuous professional development is that of reflection, yet little of my adult teaching training all those years ago focused on how to do this outside the context of the training course itself. There seemed to be an unspoken assumption that I already knew how to do this, which was never checked. Some reflection was enforced as a matter of institutional policy – the results summary at the end of a course, although this was more about identifying issues of student performance in order to explain their marks, with minimal emphasis on reflecting about my teaching practice. Reflection had been a compulsory component of my capstone experience as a student, but we weren't taught about the giants of reflective thinking – the likes of Mezirow (1990), Schön (1983), and Dewey (Dimova & Kamarska, 2015) – or about how to apply their methods to our own experiences.

As facilitator of that same capstone project course, I decided that if the students were required to reflect formally on their own experience, I would do the same – a case of "one rule to rule them all." The writing would be to find a way to say what I know, to give voice to something that might otherwise not be described and captured; I would go further than that, though—I would share my thoughts with my capstone cohort after the end of each trimester, so they could know how I had been growing alongside them on, and learn from my experience, beyond the formal end of their capstone experience. Plack and Greenberg (2005) point to reflection as something that is simultaneously practised at multiple levels – dealing with the problem immediately in front of the practitioner while at the same time thinking about its potential causes, whether I am taking the most effective actions I can, and what the future implications of my decision are likely to be.

Having captured my reflections through events generic and common enough that participants other than me could not be identified, they can have another life as problem-solving tools. Munby (1989) identifies the importance of feedback as a part of Schön's reflective model and the way in which that allows me to reframe my understanding of events and outcomes. I would argue an important part of that reflective feedback (to me) is its authenticity. Its connection to ill-defined problems, even if the processes are relatively predictable; multiple sources and perspectives, collaboration and multiple possible outcomes (Pearce, 2016), means I am living in the same world my learners are experiencing, having similar reaction for (probably) similar reasons, and this gives value and credibility to the reflections.

Their permanence means I am creating an ever-growing library to which I can refer for dealing with future problems. The criticality of lived experiences is shown by Droege (2013) to be an important determinant of how memories are recalled and reassembled for conscious use. As a foundation-stone of my continuing professional development, these formal reflections formed an evolving journal allowing me to adopt a Janus perspective (Bates & Wright, 2019), looking to the past and the future as necessary to understand the value of my present experiences. There is no single 'right' or 'wrong' answer to the questions prompted by my reflections – there are only answers that address particular circumstances at particular times, and which provide general guidance for facilitating future project teams. It is both my privilege and, I believe, my obligation to share such answers as I do have with learners and peers alike in order to multiply their value when they prompt others to think before they do.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I have titled this article as an ode to a change agent. While I own the final thoughts that have given form and order to these words, I acknowledge they are not mine alone. As a lifelong learner and professional educator, they represent many years of mahi, many voices, much kōrero and many collaborations. They represent events deemed successes **and** failures. They represent relationships created, nurtured, and ended in various ways. They represent not only my growth as a collaborative Work-Based Learning practitioner to this point, but also the foundation of who I am yet to become. While they are not the only themes that could have been extracted from the ode they are, based on my own experience, the most critical when it comes to the success of workplace learning as a facilitator or as a learner. My experiences and my learning – these are my gifts to you to adopt, adapt and use as you will.

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