A dynamic model of occupational identity formation

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Introduction

Research undertaken through the EC Leonardo da Vinci sponsored EUROPROF project has highlighted the need for those involved in HRD and VET to adopt a broad developmental view of occupational competence. This paper develops these ideas a stage further in an attempt to produce a model of occupational identity formation, which is sufficiently dynamic so as to recognise that there are continuities and changes to occupational identities over time. Such a model could be a useful aid to a consideration of the implications for education and training of VET professionals in two respects. First it helps VET professionals recognise that the process of helping others become more highly skilled is essentially a dynamic process. Second it can be used to scrutinise how the occupational identities of VET professionals develop, at a time when the roles of many trainers, tutors and coaches in this field are undergoing great change.

Initially in this paper the problems associated with static representations of occupational identity formation will be outlined, before the focus shifts to the presentation of a more dynamic model. The theoretical commitments underlying this model are outlined, it is placed within a wider theoretical framework, and the judgement is made that it could be used as a tool for examining the ways trainers, tutors, coaches and other VET professionals develop occupational identities and how these change over time.

Problems with a static representation of the processes of becoming skilled

The processes whereby people become skilled are complex. The implicit model underlying common-sense thinking about skill acquisition is that there is a body of skills, knowledge and understanding that has to be mastered before someone can be considered skilled. This model highlights an important aspect of skill acquisition, but it makes the process appear as if it is a simple linear transmission process. This linear transmission process though can be problematised in a number of ways.

First, it is a static representation - it does not allow for changes to the body of skills, knowledge and understanding to be acquired. Nor does it recognise the longitudinal dimension to becoming skilled. That is, what it is to be skilled is different, to a smaller or greater extent, at the time you start on the process of becoming skilled from what it is when you formally complete the process.

Second, the social dimension of becoming skilled is not emphasised. The skills, knowledge and understanding that an individual develops over time are acquired in particular social settings. The social context in which learning takes places needs to be acknowledged. Individuals learn with and from others, and help others learn, and the significance of this means that the process of skill acquisition needs to be placed in a social context.

Third, the body of skills, knowledge and understanding to be mastered is represented as external to the individual. This does not allow for the individual to be an agent in the construction of her or his own particular set of skills and understandings that he or she acquires. That is, even if individuals are faced with a similar (changing) body of skills, knowledge and understanding, **how** they go about trying to achieve mastery of that body of skills, knowledge and understanding may be very different.

The most significant criticism though is that the focus upon becoming skilled could itself be regarded as too narrow in certain contexts. There is a need to ask the question 'for what purpose is someone seeking to become skilled?'. Immediately it can be seen that there is a difference between learning part of a body of skills, knowledge and understanding for the purposes of a hobby, as a means of securing part-time or occasional employment, or as a means of 'making a living' over an extended period of time. In the latter case, it may be more appropriate to focus upon processes of occupational identity formation.

The final additional dimension to a consideration of becoming skilled, in the context of acquiring an occupational identity, is that these processes will take place within particular 'communities of practice'. There may be a broad community of practice at the occupational level, but there will be more particular communities of practice associated with particular work organisations and education and training institutions in which skills are being developed. Indeed it may be that particular workgroups within an institution have typical ways of working that differentiate them to some extent from other groups.

A dynamic model of occupational identity formation

From the above it is possible to identify to identify what is required from a more comprehensive model of occupational identity formation in particular work organisations. It has to:
− be a dynamic representation, allowing for change and development over time;
− have a strong social dimension, whereby an individual learns, works and interacts with others;
− allow the individual to be a significant actor in the construction of her or his own occupational identity;
− recognise the existence of general and particular 'communities of practice' associated with particular occupations and organisations, and acknowledge that these can operate at a number of levels.

Any model proposed needs not only an internal coherence, but also needs to engage with other theoretical propositions, if it is to offer a more general and comprehensive explanation. A diagrammatic representation of the proposed model is outlined in Figure 1.

changing

activities at work

engagement   engagement

interaction

individual ⟷ others

working, learning, other
relationships

development   recognition

identity at work

becoming

communities of practice
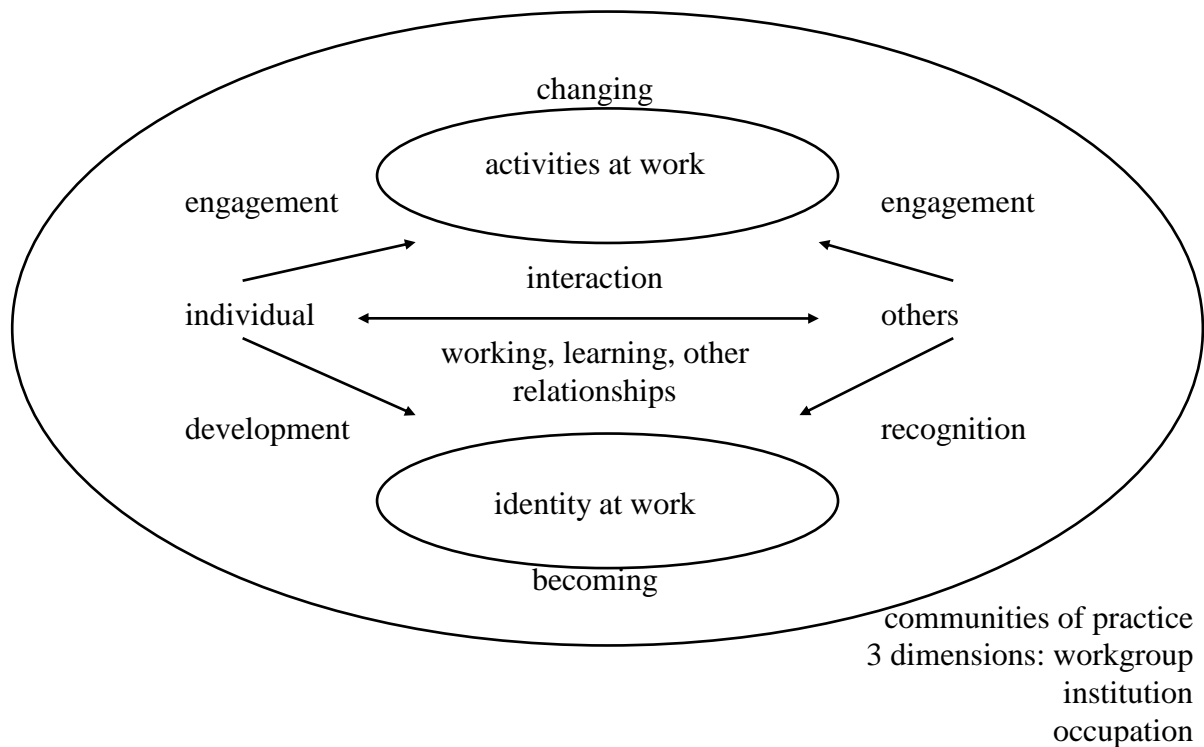3 dimensions: workgroup
institution
occupation

Figure 1: Model of occupational identity formation

What is difficult to convey in two dimensions is the dynamic, developmental nature of the model. The sets of activities at work and communities of practice and the identities they support are all changing. It is also important to remember that not all aspects of these activities, practices and identities are passively received by those engaging in them while in the process of becoming skilled. Rather the 'about to be qualified' and 'newly qualified' may play an important role in changing aspects of those activities, practices and identities. Indeed an understanding of such dynamism is required if a fundamental tension about occupational identity formation processes is to be recognised: that is, there is both continuity and change in how these processes work out over time.

Fundamental theoretical commitments underlying the model

Learning as a social process

An individual learns through interaction and communication with others. The process of learning though does not generate a single type of interaction. Rather learning takes place in contexts in which there may be multiple dimensions to the nature of the interactions: there may be a host of working and other relationships that have an influence upon the learning process.

Individuals learn from a variety of sources and relationships. Not only are these relationships patterned differently, according to differences between individuals and contexts, but also the sheer variety in what, how and from whom learning occurs is sufficient to ensure there is not a linear transmission of learning. Changes in the particular constellations and configurations of influence and different patterns of relationships are sufficient to ensure that learning as experienced can differ significantly for different individuals even within broadly similar

contexts. Thus learning is a social process, but with differential effects and outcomes on particular individuals.

The significance of developing an identity

When considering the formation of occupational identities, there are two traps for the unwary. The first is to assume a smooth transition into appropriate skilled work for those who complete their initial skill training. This concept of progressive career development has been unravelling since the 1980s. For example, Herget (1987) found that many newly qualified skilled workers in (West) Germany did not find work they considered matched their skills and qualifications. In some cases work would be found in a completely different occupation: in such circumstances the extent to which an individual feels he or she 'is' a skilled worker is problematic.

The second trap is in thinking that the occupation in which young people are training always has particular significance for them. A young person may attach far greater importance to 'developing an identity' in a broader sense than to developing a particular occupational commitment. The distinction could be portrayed as the difference between 'making a life' and 'making a living'. When expressed in that way, it can readily be seen that the former is of greater significance, and that the extent to which the latter (occupational) orientation is a central component of the former may vary between individuals and over time.

The net result of the above is that it is necessary to keep in mind the significance of developing a broad identity. An occupational identity being just one of a number of smaller identities that make up the overall identity of an individual.

Contested nature of experienced skilled worker status

The above arguments have indicated that the process of becoming skilled is a social activity, in which a number of others have an interest besides the individual directly concerned. While acknowledgement of formal status as a skilled worker may come through completion of an apprenticeship or similar status, both the individuals themselves and others may be wary of conferring the epithet 'fully skilled' at this time. That is, more likely to come when the individual and others recognise that he or she is an 'experienced skilled worker'. Indeed there will often be a negotiation of meaning, whereby you are only an experienced skilled worker when you yourself and others recognise you as such.

One clear sign of recognition comes when others (for example, clients, peers or trainees) turn to the individual for advice, because they acknowledge the individual possesses valued skill, knowledge, expertise or experience which is acquired over time. External recognition can also come from management, through job grading and/or the type of work allocated to the individual, or through the type of work he or she can get in the external labour market.

Acquisition of experienced skilled worker status is contested in the sense that it is not clear at what precise point of time an individual reaches this status and because it depends on judgements of a number of people, who may be using different criteria in forming their judgements. However, besides external recognition an individual also has to recognise the value of her or his own skills. That is, he or she has to have a sense of self worth and recognition of and a belief that he or she owns significant skills.

Entry into a community of practice

The ideas that:

- learning is a relational social process;
- that processes of becoming skilled take place within a broader process of identity formation;
- and that recognition of significant achievement (and attainment of the status of experienced practitioner) is itself a socially mediated (or contested) process, dependent on the recognition of others and a sense of self-worth

all fit with the idea that a dominant theme in occupational identity formation is entry into a community of practice. That is, individuals are developing occupational identities that need to be related to particular socially situated, contextually embedded practice.

Interdependence of structure and agency

There may be a danger that the idea of a community of practice is elevated to a position whereby the individual is seen as 'becoming' a practitioner, rather than just learning the practice, but it is still a matter of taking on identities and roles, which are pre-existent. Whereas in the proposed model, individuals may take a pro-active role in becoming a full participant in a changed community of practice, which has been partly changed by their efforts. Hence there is scope for individual agency to act upon the structures and processes in such a way so that a new community of practice develops.

Other key aspects of the model

Individual engagement with (changing) activities at work

Individuals learn how to engage in the activities at work in the way they do. Company management may have very clear ideas of what they considered to be appropriate ways for their skilled workers, and those in the process of becoming skilled, to engage with their work. Individuals may react very differently to such expectations, with behaviours ranging from complete rejection to complete engagement. Between these extremes newly skilled workers may exhibit a wide range of attitudes and behaviours in the extent to which they engage with the activities they perform at work (Brown 1996).

Development of individual identities at work

The technical possession of the requisite skills, knowledge, understanding and expertise necessary to be considered skilled is only one component to the development of an identity at work. One major distinction between young people becoming skilled was the extent to which they saw themselves as active in constructing their own identity, and in how they perceived their developing occupational identity. Some young people rather passively accepted their place at work: they saw themselves as likely to be doing broadly similar work with their current employer for the foreseeable future. They were not operating with any progressive notion of career, nor did they have any great expectations of work. Their identity at work seemed bound up with being an 'ordinary' (rather than a 'special') worker: doing the job steadily, without entertaining thoughts of promotion or changing employers. On the other

hand, there were examples of young people who were actively constructing dynamic identities, in which occupational success was an important factor (Brown 1996).

Engagement of others with (changing) activities at work

The above has emphasised the significance of the extent to which an individual engages with work activities and the type of identity at work that he or she develops. However, the reaction of others can also have direct or indirect effects on perceptions that the individual and/or others have on that engagement and developing identity. This is perhaps most marked when the work activities are themselves changing rapidly. A 'battle' between 'old' and 'new' ways of working, and ways of engaging with work, is common at all times, but is given greater impetus when there is major organisational and/or technological change in a workplace. This 'battle' may be given added spice, if the proponents of the different views represent an 'old guard' and a 'new guard', trained in different ways and with differing sets of skills and attitudes.

Recognition of others in the development of individual identity at work

How they are perceived by other workgroup members, managers, other workers, trainees, clients and so on can all be influential in the formation of an occupational identity and an identity at work for an individual. The judgements of others may not necessarily be consistent and, even if they were, people may ascribe different values to particular characteristic. Thus a thorough painstaking approach to work may be appreciated by trainees and some clients ('conscientious; professional'), but be seen as irritating by managers and other clients ('too slow'). The recognition of others can help shape, confirm or contradict an individual's developing identity at work.

Interaction with others

The salience of the interaction between an individual and others in working, learning and other relationships is self-evident in any process of identity formation. The formation, development, maintenance and change of an occupational identity, and/or identities at work, are influenced by the nature of the relationships around which they are constructed. For example, recently skilled workers may still require the explicit support, encouragement and advice from their peers to reach the standard expected of experienced skilled workers in that company (Brown 1996).

Communities of practice

That individuals who became formally skilled were in the process of entering an occupational community of practice was most evident in Germany, where the whole initial vocational education and training system is driven by the principal of 'Beruf' (Reuling forthcoming). However, within school-based initial vocational education and training the de facto community of practice within which the individual spends most time is the school, college or training institution. As a consequence, individuals may feel that they are still a considerable way from acquiring the full occupational identity in such circumstances, even if they are technically well-equipped to carry out the required work tasks.

Individual organisations can have their own distinctive communities of practice around which they structure their work activities and which influence their attitudes to training. Particular workgroups may have their own distinctive community of practice too. This is perhaps likely to be strongest where a specialist group is set up within a larger organisation, with people from a mix of occupational backgrounds, a different set of work activities and a different pattern of inter-relationships with other work groups. Such groups may consciously define themselves as 'special' (Brown 1996).

Concluding discussion

From the above it is clear that the overall model looks as if it can handle a number of key tensions in any attempted explanation of occupational identity formation. In particular it looks as if it can cope with the tensions that:

- there are elements of continuity and change over time in the processes whereby occupational identities are formed;
- the individual is a significant actor in the construction of her or his own occupational identity, but the process is not wholly subjective. On the other hand, individuals and their interactions with others are partly constrained by the structures and processes of the communities of practice in which they take place, but that these interactions over time may lead to the development of changed communities of practice;
- occupational identities vary in the intensity with which they are held, and in the significance individuals ascribe to them. That is, while they are central to our research, they may or may not be of great significance to the individuals we are tracking. On the other hand, the broader process of identity formation in the sense of 'making a life' is fundamental to all individuals.

Additionally the model fits well with an existing coherent theoretical framework, as put forward by Lave (1991) in 'Situated Learning in Communities of Practice'. Her general ideas [of:
- changing knowledgeable skill being subsumed in the process of changing identity in and through membership of a community of practice;
- situated social practice emphasising interdependency of agent and world;
- activity, meaning, cognition, learning and knowing being underpinned by inherent processes of social negotiation of meaning within a socially and culturally structured world;
- the way newcomers become old-timers as they develop a changing understanding of 'practice' through participation in an ongoing community of practice;
- the changing relationships of newcomers to ongoing activities and other participants]

All serve to ensure that the focus is upon a dynamic process. The model proposed can therefore be used as a tool for analysis of the ways trainers, tutors, coaches and other VET professionals develop occupational identities and how these change over time.

References

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