The art of professional conversation

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Summary

The assessment of prior learning is central to assessment procedures in many institutions in the 21st century but applicants frequently struggle to construct the portfolios required of them. Breaking new ground with assessment viewed as a dynamic process has enabled CAPL in New Zealand to take a leap forward with higher level assessments.

Presentation

It has been argued that what you have learned through experience, whether or not it is translated to credits through the assessment of prior learning, is the most important learning you can acquire. The basic premise around the assessment of prior learning originates from the theory of experiential learning and is that people learn by doing or learning that happens as experiences are transformed through understanding, perception and involvement. Critical reflection plays a major part in the changing of experience into learning and involves consciously thinking about one's experiences and reassessing one's beliefs and values. Narrative storytelling as an assessment method has its origins in the social science methodologies: discourse analysis and behavioural interviewing as well as in indigenous pedagogy. The structured questioning process attached to the storytelling for determining competencx, adapted and used by the Centres of Assessment of Prior Learning in New Zealand is based on a facilitated process, a series of steps, to encourage 'scaffolding' and 'help' interactions and the metacognitive activities of planning, selecting, connecting, tuning and monitoring. This scaffolding allows the candidate to explore information, form and test hypotheses while avoiding the wasted experience of blind guesses or actions taken without sufficient understanding of the context. Narrative storytelling fits well with indigenous and adult learners. Core to the process is the paradigm of the reflective practitioner. Furthermore, if an ultimate goal of higher learning is lifelong learning which automatically includes forms of reflection and self-assessment, then engaging in assessment through professional conversation provides a useful start.

The art of professional conversation

Professional conversation

Professional conversation has its origins in two social science methodologies – discourse analysis and behavioural interviewing. It also draws from theorists such as Dewey and Foucault. The conversation centres round:

- What the candidate wants to say about their learning experience in their current and previous work roles
- How these experiences meet some or all of the assessment requirements for the courses and/or qualifications.

Resistance to the method

In the early stages of the draft contract details between Christchurch College of Education and the Centres for Assessment of Prior Learning (CAPLNZ), the argument was put forward that at the level at which we would be assessing, there must be writing. Our Christchurch CAPL colleague reported that:

> … they feel very strongly that at Level 7 reflective or critical thinking is often done in writing and would like to see some of the assessment presented in writing. (Only a portion as they feel the rest is fine)

> They wish to maintain the integrity at that level and with everything going on at the moment around programmes they don't want us to show flaws.

Peters (2005) raises the problem of the concept of APL in an academic context because a common view of tertiary lecturers is that the institution is a place where people come to learn, or to be taught rather than one where people bring their existing knowledge for recognition. The effect on APL is that emphasis is placed on the necessity to present learning in a form which meets academic criteria, even though it has not taken place in an academic setting. Awareness of this added to the teachers' hostility.

Here is another pro-writing comment in the same vein:

> 'The crux of the matter for me is that this APL process is fundamentally saying that the skills and knowledge displayed have degree equivalency and degrees have a fundamental link in that they all expect candidates to demonstrate level 7 cognitive skills and processes both in written and oral modes (often predominantly in written).
>
> Whilst I applaud and encourage innovative assessments I think, in this case, we run the risk of "undermining" the process if we are not seen as overtly seeking some critical similarities to all other equivalent level qualifications.'

We identified two immediate areas of concern in the arguments presented. The first was that the solution proposed was weak, based on a 'portion' as a token gesture, and the speaker's doubts about the process being flawed.

The second was in our own colleague's apparent confusion about what we as a group were proposing, demonstrated when he said, "could we look at doing a portion as a written reflection? .... as I can't see many teachers having this in their portfolio already to present at this level". He had previously been at meetings of the four CAPL sites where we were opting to go down the professional conversation path *as opposed to portfolio development* for several reasons:

First, the issue of plagiarism was a real one. The practice of sharing ideas and documents in the teaching profession is widespread and embedded in their culture. Furthermore, at the workshops run by CAPL, cluster groups were to be formed so that teachers could support and motivate one another through the four weeks of preparation for assessment.

We later saw several occasions where a virtual book had been prepared which two or three teachers were mistakenly thinking they could *read* at their assessment. Some teachers enlisted the help of the government agency Team Solutions to assist them with aspects around contemporary assessment philosophies and it was difficult to know whose material was being presented. Many of the documents presented were not available in electronic copy so submitting them to the software programme "Turnitin" was not a realistic solution.

Second, our experience with portfolio development has been that it is a very time-consuming process, dogged with problems such as the unavailability of individuals who could attest to past employment roles and a not uncommon reason for people giving up on the prior learning recognition process.

Third, the quality of portfolios varies greatly. The portfolio which is clearly referenced and complete is a joy for an assessor to evaluate. But CAPL facilitators report that many portfolios submitted for evaluation are returned to the candidates for resubmission, because there has been a failure to demonstrate that the prior learning matches defined outcomes. The time involved in checking them and then having them evaluated has been considerable, and the thought (in this instance) of hundreds of portfolios piling up on the assessor's desks was daunting, to say the least. How could they be certain that the material they were evaluating was original and unique?

Fourth, two of us at opposite ends of New Zealand had been trialling the professional conversation in a small way during the year previous to the contract and saw an ideal opportunity to invest time and resources to develop the method and make comparisons between all four Centres.

So our argument went back:

> Assessment by essay is the way many providers traditionally manage prior learning processes. We have discussed this at our CAPL centre before, and while we have some understanding of why people might want essay answers, we do not support this being the assessment tool in this case.

> These unit standards are essentially practitioner-based unit standards. If people cannot articulate their understandings and the growth and change in themselves which the critical reflection unit standards are about then there is a serious issue about the candidates and the mismatch with the unit standards they and we are choosing for them.

> Our view is it is possible to assess level 7 verbally, many of our higher level business clients are being assessed at level 7 and some previous social work clients - all their unit standards had elements of critical reflection and synthesis. Since moving to this form of assessment the evidence presented

by clients has been much deeper, more coherent in its fullness and assessors have been much more confident with depth and breadth. The move from the experience description to articulating the understandings that have formed out of the experiences runs smoothly with a well-prepared candidate. We have been party to many level 7 assessments where people have been able to demonstrate the links between theory, practice and reflection.

We hope that when working with the teachers we will be able to encourage them to use technology such as PowerPoint where for instance people can take the opportunity to show linkages through modelling or diagrams or whatever.

Those arguing for written reflections responded:

Firstly I agree in essence with your comments ... assessment at L7 doesn't have to be in essay form when there are other suitable alternatives.

However, I have to acknowledge that one of the skills learnt by candidates at L7 is the ability to transfer their critical information, ideas or research and most L7 programmes develop this skill as part of their design.

I think it would be prudent to look at including some form of written reflection. It only needs to be a portion of a unit and could be brought to the assessment as evidence (saving presentation and assessment time). Teachers who have previously done this would only need to produce a copy of their work.

Having an element of written work in the assessment would allay the fears of individuals looking in on the process and no doubt there will be those that do this once we have started (or completed) the assessments.

Teachers would then be encouraged to review the eMit (online) site and the resources we have on it - another L7 skill that may not be utilised in the oral approach.

I see it as helping to establish a sense of parity between our process and L7 classroom assessment. This must certainly reflect well on the process and the teachers who complete the task.

Our final response to this was as follows:

> The speaking and listening strand in the Curriculum document for English is not a junior partner to the other strands, eg written language (reading and writing) and the visual strand (viewing and presenting). Oral language is regularly assessed in the English curriculum. In the planned assessments for the teachers there will be documentation, much of which will have been written by the participants themselves, presentation of a range of materials, and the articulation of professional practice which includes reflection on that practice.
>
> Plagiarism of other's materials is a serious issue for us in APL, and the method we have chosen follows the European model of oral assessment to ensure authenticity. Whilst we have no problem with the statement about demonstrating L7 skills taught in a programme, the paradigm shift needed when assessing experiential learning that did not happen in a traditional context is one that we have worked extremely hard at MIT to accomplish. Paper and pen testing is a traditional and acceptable (though somewhat flawed as we have seen in NCEA) method where the teaching has largely required paper and pen assignment work. We believe CAPL is at the cutting edge of innovation in assessment; that we have proved over and over that our procedures are academically rigorous and sound. Ground-breaking can pose a threat to some, but ... nothing ventured, nothing gained. There WILL be written documentation, there WILL be presentation of a variety of items, and there WILL be authentic speaking and listening.
>
> We have spent months developing workshops based on the storytelling assessment method, and feel confident that our preparation of candidates will ensure first class assessment of their knowledge at Level 7. Video records will be kept of all assessments here at MIT for anyone to view.

The outcome was that the assessments were to be conducted through professional conversations or storytelling, and the video evidence would be reviewed after the first 10 assessments to check consistency between sites.

The role of critical reflection

The implication that some teachers may have developed their own learning to degree level is supported in educational theory by Malcolm Knowles (1975) who emphasizes that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for decisions. Reasons for the teachers' self-direction are given by Stephen Brookfield (1986) as the desire to acquire new knowledge and to purposefully explore a field of knowledge. Furthermore, in his research into the learning projects of adults, Allan Tough (1979) arrived at the notion that most adults spend 700 hours each year in deliberate self-planned learning projects. Cross (1977) also drew conclusions about the learning efforts of adults: "Almost every adult undertakes some sort of learning … each year, with the number of activities falling between 3 and thirteen".

The four-stage Experiential Learning Cycle developed by David Kolb (1984) suggests that an experience in itself does not guarantee that learning will take place. For meaningful learning to occur the individual needs to observe the experience reflectively, considering how it can be related to other situations, actively experiment with the learning by acting on it and evaluating the result, and then begin the cycle again.

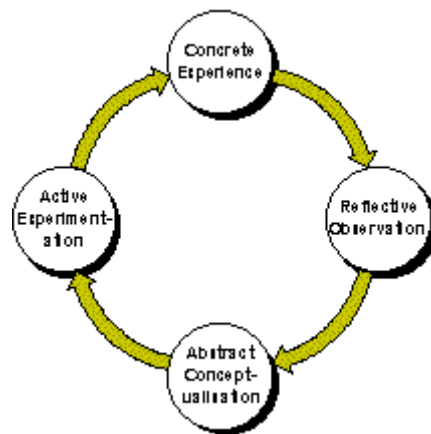Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

Fig 1 Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984)

In considering the learning experiences of teachers, there was general agreement that learning may take place in a range of circumstances, and that the workplace offers potential for learning. However it was also recognised that opportunity alone does not lead to learning. Motivation is an important factor, as is reflection.

It became increasingly clear that the teachers might not be equal in their ability to perform at the different stages in Kolb's cycle. Kolb attributes this to learning preferences but insists that the quality of a learner's reflection has considerable impact on the rate of their progress in learning.

There must be an acknowledgment here that some people may never reflect nn their actions - either consciously or unconsciously - and so may impede their learning and development. It was anticipated within CAPL that there may be considerable variance between teachers whose role in middle management had given them significant insights into planning, managing and evaluating, and those with a lesser role. Boud and Walker (1996:79) identify several barriers to working with experience, including:

- Presuppositions about what is and is not possible

- Expectations of others: society, peer group, figures of authority, family

- Inadequate preparation

- Lack of opportunity to step aside from tasks

- Lack of support from others

- Established patterns of thought and behaviour

Recently, a client who had been assessed in 2003 through portfolio development, returned for further APL. It was explained to her that since 2003 we had gone through an evolutionary process to the point where we preferred the structured storytelling method. Her response was "I don't mind doing it, but I don't see why it's necessary – after all, it's all in there". She pointed to a pile of papers, neatly labelled as though ready for assessment. One of our staff spent several hours looking through the papers and prepared some feedback for our client. A significant comment was:

> Furthermore and more importantly, (name deleted) has not yet produced any critical evaluation of her materials, which should be the goal of a paper titled "Evaluation in Adult Education and Training".

The argument is put forward by theorists of adult critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990, 1998; Brookfield, 1994, 1995) that the necessary process involved can occur only as adults go through experiences in their interpersonal, work and political lives which are characterized by breadth, depth, diversity and different degrees of intensity which

only comes with time. They hold that it is not possible to look critically at the validity of our unquestioned assumptions about interpersonal relationships, work and politics until we have formed and experienced the loss of several intimate relationships, until we have lived through the conflicts and pressures of workplaces, and until we have done something political and lived with the outcomes of those political actions. According to this interpretation, what is distinctive about adult learning is the search for meaning in these complex, contradictory and ambiguous situations, and the process by which critically reflective abilities are developed in this search. It has been our experience that through storytelling, candidates are actively engaged in constructing meaning rather than being simply deliverers of information. In the recent situation described above, a further comment in the feedback was:

> In sum, (name) should select and structure her thoughts and reflections and explain the meaning of her paper documentation through the medium of a professional conversation.

Stephen Brookfield's model of critical thinking is closely aligned to the practice adopted by CAPL. In an article written for the Adult Education Quarterly, he suggests that all the decisions we make, no matter how small, are based on assumptions, some of which are correct, others are unexamined. He further says that we need to be sure our assumptions are accurate and valid to make good decisions and that critical thinking is the way we uncover and check them. The process is first to find out what our assumptions are, which may involve other people, whose perceptions of us help us to uncover our assumptions. It may involve reading books or travelling to other cultures. Next we check the accuracy and validity of our assumptions through research. And finally we apply our analysis to our decisions.

A facilitated process

The term scaffolding has been developed as a useful metaphor for an effective method for helping candidates develop their thinking skills. The facilitator provides temporary support (like scaffolding in the construction industry) to help candidates bridge the gap between their current abilities and the intended goal. Scaffolds can be tools, such as written guidelines or cue cards, or techniques, such as modelling or prompting by the facilitator. As candidates demonstrate greater proficiency on their own, the scaffolding is gradually removed.

In the CAPL process, the applicant for APL is proactive in planning for their storytelling. They subject their many life experiences to a selection process, choosing episodes that will enable them to identify and test their assumptions. These stories must then be connected to the learning outcomes of a course. The candidate works on tuning the story to fit the assessment timeframe and ensure that only relevant ideas are included. Throughout this phase the facilitator monitors the process, preferably when requested by the candidate.

Take X, who seeks APL for a course about change management in a business operation. One of the learning outcomes is "explain the causes of change in a business operation". The episode he selects is from a period in NZ's recent political history which became known as "Rogernomics" after the (then) Finance Minister, Roger Douglas. Government regulations required local government organisations to start tendering for work. If the portfolio method of assessment was being used, this client would have great difficulty in obtaining attestations from his former employees, due to the fact that the QANGO (Quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation) no longer exists.

The role of the CAPL facilitator is to monitor the preparation process and help the client to unearth and challenge some of the assumptions under which he was operating in the incident. For instance, the client has far too much detail in the story for a 30 minute assessment, but eventually the tuning is complete and an "agenda" drawn up so that all parties are clear about the direction of the story (Appendix One). When he describes the change for teams of workers operating on different sites, for example, he says that during the change process he moved workers around to even up the quality of output and "they didn't like it". This is a statement to challenge and he is asked "Did they say they didn't like it?" He says "No, but I could sense their mood," Again the facilitator challenges him "Did you look at your assumption through the lens of the workers themselves?" After reflecting on this he acknowledges that his assumption may not have been valid, that they may have been concerned about being put off and that this might have been the first step. This puts a new complexion on the episode, and the actions he might have taken had he asked the workers how they felt.

It is in the process of this scaffolding that the candidate is able to explore their own information and judge its accuracy. Narrative storytelling fits well with both

indigenous and adult learners. In the course of another recent professional conversation, it was evident that Tui (not her real name) has a clear and appropriate philosophy of teaching and learning. She has been teaching for twenty-odd years. Her current position is that of Head of Faculty for Te Reo Maori. Tui articulated a philosophy based on the principle of her passion for Te Reo Maori and the importance of sharing her skills with Maori students and everyone who is interested, including staff. She explained that significant influences on the development of this philosophy have been her parents (who were first language speakers of Te Reo and passed on the language to Tui) and the Te Atä Kura programme which challenged her to continue to share her language.

During this discourse Tui showed an awareness that her beliefs are consistent with those expressed by other teachers and in educational literature. She also showed an awareness that her philosophy may be better suited to some teaching and learning environments than to others.

Tui was able to evaluate the effectiveness of her own teaching style with reference to different types of class and in different teaching situations. She described appropriate strategies to better include different types of students in the learning process. She believes strongly in the importance of whanaungatanga and Te Kotahitanga.

The centrality of reflection in the process of moving towards learning from life experience is found in Donald Schon's concept of reflective practice, although Schon was only one of many writers promoting the importance of reflective learning in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, Australian learning theorist David Boud actually changed his learning theory to correspond to Schon's. Originally his theories (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985) had incorporated reflection after a learning experience, but he later came to believe in Schon's notion that 'we experience as we reflect, and we reflect as we experience' (Boud and Walker, 1992:167).

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AGENDA FOR X's ASSESSMENT

Introduction of self – employed by MCC and offshoot
Brief explanation of change happening
1.1 Need for change – Govt regulations requiring tendering
                 Part of Rogernomics – causes of change including economic,
                 political, legal, and costs
                 RMA – dumping mini tips etc
                 NZ public's expectations lifted (societal causes)
1.2 Council restructured – business unit – C D (name) etc (personnel)
     Smoko room – industrial relations – union
     Looking at putting people off (contraction)
1.3 Formed Manukau Works – Reserves and Resources, contracting to MCC
     Joint ventures between Excell and Streetsmart.

2.1 Restructuring was

Discontinuous	Incremental
- one-off	- gradual
- training	- like TQM - targets set for improvement
- stress management	- not strong tool for change

2.3 Training opportunities

Advantages	**Disadvantages**
- Became better in the end	Very stressful
- Advancement	People left
- Development	Attitudes changed
- Experience in QM	Hostility

2.2 Training opportunities – quality customer service workshops
BARS – evaluate best practice – JIT training
Books on change

3.1 Resistance to change
- Pride in patch diminished
- Work teams – working across boundaries vs warring, eg Papatoetoe and Mangere
– amenable in end
- Using knowledge to lay them off – lack of trust
- Fear of pay cuts

Reasons to support change
- Better rapport – threw a shout – they identified with that
- Liked handling of crises
- Opportunity to develop self
- Promotion
- Learn new skills
Strategy – build personal relationship
- Systematic
- Fair
- Fellow Principles