

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

***SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AND APPRENTICES:
A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED STUDY***

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For the award of

Doctor of Education

2015

Abstract

Developing the capacity of learners to be self-directed is beneficial for both individual workers and economies alike. This study investigates the development of capability for self-directed learning in a group of apprentices in the building and construction industry and suggests that such capability is best developed in the early years of entry into the workforce. For tradespersons this time is during their apprenticeship.

The purpose of this study was to develop a deep understanding of how apprentices develop the capacity to be self-directed learners. The aim was to develop a substantive theory that illuminated and provided insight into this phenomenon.

The methodology of constructivist grounded theory was used to conduct the study. A sample size of 13 participants in the building and construction industry was recruited. This included apprentices who were employed by a group training organisation (GTO) and a representation of their host employers and vocational teachers located within the southern New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory geographic regions.

The substantive theory presented in this dissertation makes a contribution to knowledge of value to apprentices, employers, vocational teachers and others who seek to develop an understanding of the process of learning and development associated with apprenticeships and vocational and professional education more broadly.

The substantive theory was achieved through discovering, describing, analysing abstracting and explaining how apprentices moved through the phases (or categories) of *committing effort*, *experiencing work*, *confirming value*, and *heightening motivation* towards becoming self-directed learners. The substantive theory reveals that as the apprentices progressed through these phases they were constantly engaged in decision-making processes, evaluating and re-evaluating experiences throughout their apprenticeship. The evaluation outcomes could be positive or negative and were dependent upon the expectancies that the apprentices placed on themselves as well as their interpretation of the expectancies placed on them by others.

In this study the manner in which the various conceptual elements, processes and categories connect revolves around the apprentices' experiences of *sponsorship*. *Sponsorship* is the term used to describe the more experienced or confident other who has both a personal and professional interest in the apprentice's development and uses their influence to create a safe learning environment to enable the apprentice to develop expertise.

The importance of the management of the learning environment proved critical, as suitable learning contexts do not appear by accident. In this study it emerged that the

sponsor was the most important factor determining the quality of the learning environment. Effective sponsors were able to manage the learning context in a manner where the apprentice felt safe to ask questions, make mistakes, develop expertise and eventually accept responsibility, be autonomous and solve complex problems. Indeed, the apprentices became tradespeople who were not only competent but were true self-directed learners.

By managing this learning context, the sponsor created an environment that enabled the intrinsic motivation of the apprentice to drive their own growth and development towards becoming self-directed learners. When the sponsor creates a workplace where learning thrives, the apprentice begins to develop both competence and confidence. Increasingly, the apprentice begins to consolidate a durable sense of vocational identity. More and more others (both within and outside the immediate workplace) begin to recognise the apprentice as a legitimate member of the trade. Over time, with the development of expertise—as the apprentice begins to accept more and more responsibility for their own learning, and with encouragement and opportunity from the sponsor—they begin to reflect on their own learning. Increasingly and steadily they become self-directed learners.

Certification of Dissertation

I certify that the idea, result, analysis and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award expect where otherwise acknowledged.

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Acknowledgements

There are many people that I need to thank.

Dr. Mark Dawson and Dr. Janice Jones as my supervisors from the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Thank you for your professional and personal support throughout this study and for guiding me through my apprenticeship as a researcher, including the peculiarities of academia. This thanks is also extended to the research support office, library and members of the ethics committee at USQ. I would also like to acknowledge the editing services provided by Ms. Katie Poidomani from *Edge Editing*.

A big thank you to the apprentices, host employers, vocational teachers and the supporting organisations that willingly gave up their time to participate within this research and their combined interest in increasing the quality of apprenticeships and their industry stewardship.

I would also like to thank all of my friends, family and colleagues for their ongoing support, robust discussions and humour. This helped to keep me motivated and on task. At the risk of leaving someone out, I do not want to name anyone specifically. You know who you are!

Lastly, a deep and sincere thank you to my wife and best friend, Beck. I wouldn't have even got close to this point without your love, support and, as it seems, unlimited patience.

This thesis is dedicated to Riley Neilsen, in anticipation of the joy and success that life will bring.

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