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**Learning about belonging to a HR profession: reflections from part time,  
practising HR professionals.**

**Working Paper. Stream 16: VET and Workplace Learning.**

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## **Learning about belonging to a HR profession: reflections from part time, practising HR professionals.**

### **Introduction.**

The focus of this paper is to explore how two groups of part time, mature students use their learning gained through the achievement of national qualifications, to reflect on themselves as HR professionals. From a series of interviews undertaken sometime after the students had completed their particular programmes of study, we wanted to understand how they remembered these formal learning opportunities and how they may have influenced their work, role and image of themselves as HRM/D people. As Hoare (2006) suggests adult development and adult learning have tended to be “two separate fields of study” but are increasingly becoming integrated. Some of the rationale is that “personal learning also leads to a reconstruction of the adult’s interpretation of self” (Hoare 2006:14). Our previous papers (Nichols and Williams 2012, 2013) have reflected on how these students have re-interpreted or constructed themselves as HR professionals- the impact on their professional identity. Glaser-Segura et al (2010, p.200) note that new professionals are ‘indoctrinated in the groups’ professional identity through a combination of curricula crafted by recognized members of the professional and by pedagogical means’. Studies on learning about professional identity also tend to consider the learning involved in moving from a novice to an expert, for example, Hamilton (2012), Johnsson & Hager (2008). This paper addresses the learning for the near expert, expert and very expert professional.

In this paper the analysis of the HR professionals stories is linked more closely to their specific learning experiences and recollections. A range of theoretical perspectives is drawn on to help in that interpretation and any lessons for practice are highlighted. Learning whilst also working can be problematic, not only in terms of balancing workloads and study but also

in terms of workload demands in what are viewed as turbulent times for many sectors of industry and commerce. However adult learning theories such as the seminal work of Knowles (1975, 1990) and those relating to the self-directive nature of such learning (Tough 1979) all indicate that given the appropriate contexts adults will strive to overcome such problems. It enables them to achieve some objectives they may have set themselves but also create new experiences to readjust those goals. It is these issues that form part of the narratives discussed in this paper. Understanding the perceptions that underpin learning experiences is important if the trend towards greater use of work based learning in an educational context continues. This is particularly so with programmes which have a formally devised curriculum designed by the professional body against which participants must compare their own knowledge and expertise. Fenwick (2008) for example defines workplace learning as “informal, often embodied and embedded into everyday practices and a process rather than an outcome” (p.17) yet these students have to articulate that embedded informality in a way that can be assessed by others outside of that practice. This study falls into Fenwick’s second category of workplace learning studies of understanding how particular groups of workers learn, but in this case these are not as she highlights “marginalized populations” but main stream career oriented learners seeking an external qualification.

The paper will outline the context for the study, the type of learning being undertaken and the students involved. This is followed by a discussion of theories of learning from an adult learning perspective which enables us to develop a series of themes. It will identify the methodology used to garner the data before discussing that data. The analysis will use differing lenses in order to illuminate, reflect on and assess the impact that learning has had on these HR professionals and on their understanding of what it means to be such a professional. It thus takes a more grounded approach to the development of our understanding of our own practice in teaching, the benefits and issues of the programmes

themselves and of their HRM/D practice. The implications for a learning and development or Human resource Development function will be discussed along with any implications for HRD theory.

**Programme Context:**

There are two formal qualifications that form the basis of this study. One is the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD) Professional Assessment of Competence (PAC) based route to achieving chartered membership status. Although this specific route no longer exists a number of institutions have developed a work based learning alternative which will benefit from the development of understanding of participant learning and problem solving. Part of our research is to consider the efficacy of the old PAC route for those at more senior levels seeking to consolidate their experience. As such it might offer HRD a more appropriate platform for up skilling some layers of the workforce. Acquisition of these qualifications can lead to candidates enjoying better opportunities for acquisition of appropriate jobs, enhanced promotion prospects and increased organizational profiles. Candidates had to demonstrate their operational competence in a number of generalist and specialist HR areas along with a knowledge base commensurate with postgraduate levels of study. Each candidate completed a major management research report (MRR) and was expected to present their work via written assessment plans as notes in preparation for a professional discussion, a form of viva voce. Along with these assessment plans, the candidate produced evidence from the workplace in the form of emails, policy documents, training materials, strategic documents, procedural documentation from specific activities or assignments as appropriate for the selected areas of expertise that were mandatory and those they had chosen. The basis for success in this programme is the evidence taken from the participants' workplace. The participants are required to defend this evidence against the specified outcomes. A successful outcome from this assessment plus the MRR and

submission of a continuing professional development record and plan would enable them to become chartered members of the CIPD immediately. They were able to do so as these candidates were senior managers with more than five years' experience and the majority had far more, often with senior decision making expertise. The candidates were given two years to complete the programme.

The second group that we were interested in were those who undertook the taught route to graduate membership of CIPD, a post graduate qualification nonetheless, but the syllabus was much more restricted and proscribed than the PAC route. These students took two but mainly three years to complete their studies depending on their prior qualifications. Assessments were standardised and again prescribed against the University sector standards. Although the programme attracted middle and more junior HRM/D staff grades or roles, those we have interviewed now work middle manager level since they left the University some 4-5 years ago.

### **Methodology:**

As noted above the research took an interpretivist, narrative approach (Nichol & Williams 2012, Webster & Mertova 2007) using the interview as the source of the qualitative data. To date 11 PAC interviews and 5 taught programme students have been interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and was held either at their place of work or in a quiet interview room at the University. Interviews have been recorded and transcribed in full. Each interview indicates clearly the choice the interviewee has to not answer questions or have the recording turned off as well as the option to have a copy of the transcription. There is a broad set of themes with some sub questions that act as a guide for the interviewer and to enable a consistency of thought across the interviews. The participant is provided with a letter beforehand not only to set up the meeting but to provide an outline of the rationale for the

research and the broad themes in which we have been interested. The transcripts have then been coded using six major codes: 1) the professional HR/D role, 2) my role/career, 3) mentors and organisational influence, 4) why become qualified, 5) experience of undertaking PAC or a post-graduate diploma and 6) influence of learning on professional formation. Each of these major codes has sub codes to tease out more detail (see appendix 1). Although all are interrelated it is the codes 4, 5 and 6 that form the main focus here but the analysis will also draw on the others where appropriate to explore learning. These themes have then been used to explore four aspects of adult learning, reasons for choice of programme, influence of particular learning activities, changing mindsets or perceptions of self, raising the individual's profile/becoming more influential and examples of constraints or incentives for learning.

One of the disadvantages of the selection of interviewees is that we have only talked to those who have been successful in completing either route. There have been a very small number on both programmes over the years who have withdrawn. The learning experience for these students is therefore not accessible although could illuminate that experience through a very different lens.

### **Work based learning: a self-directed process?**

A number of authors see for example, Lester & Costly (2010), debate the arguments and differences between work place learning and work based learning. The perspective that is taken in this paper is that a more appropriate identification is that of learning **from** the workplace. The rationale is that the two routes discussed in this paper have a combination of stated externally provided learning outcomes (or in PAC language operational and knowledge indicators) and learning activities which make use of the learner's work based experiences but they are not always or necessarily directly linked to current work related issue nor is the

learning driven or decided by the candidate or student. In this case the direction is for the most part led by the CIPD, the professional body who accredit the programmes. These routes clearly do draw from much of the theory around adult learning and as noted by Merriam (2001) the mid twentieth century saw a move to differentiate adult learning from previous research which did not distinguish between children and adults. However Merriam also noted that for adult learning there is "a mosaic of theories, models, sets of principles and explanations" (2001 p3 cited in Ellinger 2004 p159). The work of Knowles and Tough developed and continued during the 1970s, 80's and 90's identified a number of differences. Knowles (1990) proposed five aspects of adult learners a) independent self-concept and can direct their own learning b) can draw on life experiences as a source of learning c) learning needs linked to changing social roles d) is problem centred and focuses on application of knowledge e) is self-motivated. Both authors and in particular Tough, as cited in Merriam (2001), also developed the concept of self-directed learning (SDL). Ellinger in 2004 noted that SDL has "a rich history of research and practice.... It has not received considerable attention in the context of HRD."(p158). She (2004 p159) suggests that despite the varied definitions it is broadly viewed as "self-learning in which learners have the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out and evaluating their own learning experiences." It can take place both within and outside of formal educational institutions. Ellinger (2004) also suggests it is related to but not the same as informal and incidental learning. All these resonate with the mixed approach of a formal curriculum or outcomes based system driving evidence of learning drawn from work based experiences in both programmes. In addition Taylor (2006) reflects on this idea of self-directed learning and its relationship to work based or work place programmes or as she describes it 'workplace-based SDL' (p215). However Taylor (2006) argues that although there has been a major focus on "the fostering of pedagogical autonomy" i.e. in developing different teaching and learning approaches there



has been much less work on reviewing how learners actually change their mind set or construct/reconstruct perceptions of self and their 'personal autonomy'. Fenwick (2008) supports the view that a major perspective of work based learning research has been this pedagogic aspect so Fenwick (2008) moves on to focus more on learning as a process. Two of her four processes i.e. emergence of identities and literacies (having the right language) and development of power/understanding the politics of work) relate more closely to the individual whilst the other two (cultural-historical activity theory and complexity theory need to be analysed from a systems and contexts perspective in which the learner resides. The focus in this paper is on the individual, so the two processes appropriate here are the acquisition of the 'right' language in which to express their chosen identity as "work communities are powerful sites of identity" p22. These enable the individual to "shape shift" through the new language and secondly how workplace learning can change or even be transformative in terms of the individual (or group's) ability to influence the power relationships and therefore the political dynamics within their role or function. Merriam (2001) and Ellinger (2004) critique the early work on SDL as assuming that an individual has complete autonomy in their choice of projects and of how and what they learn. A further area of debate is the underlying assumption that all adults are experts at managing their learning in this SDL way and do not require some direction from teachers/experts and more formal pedagogy. Mazmanian and Feldman (2011) suggest that SDL tends to lead to only moderate acquisition of knowledge so it is an area that needs direction. SDL has also been linked with organisational learning, providing individuals with the supportive organisational climate to motivate and enable them to undertake learning projects for themselves. Clardy (2000) analysed such SDL projects as those induced by changes in work systems which force people to learn new ways of working, voluntary projects whereby a candidate chooses to follow a path of learning and finally synergistic projects which were those that were a

combination of an organisational driver and a personal desire or motivation. Much of this literature is drawn from the adult educational context: however the work of Wenger (1998 cited in Stewart & Rigg 2011) on communities of practice (CoP) may also help to understand the reactions of these students. CoPs represent a group and/or organisational response to learning or as Wetherall (1996) discusses communities of interpretation are involved in developing peoples' definitions of their own and others identity. However in our context we are looking at learners from both programmes that make use of both their workplaces and the opportunities or expertise available in an educational institution. Billett (2002) for example argues that these two contexts "merely represent different instances of social practice in which learning occurs through participation" p56. What Billett (2002) goes on to suggest is that the workplace serves to sustain vocational practices whereas educational institutions 'privilege' learning. This can present a different type of experience yet both can be very structured and formalised. A number of our candidates commented on these differing contexts.

### **Findings:**

As noted in the methodology the interview responses were coded (see appendix 1) and then the outcomes from those codes were used under 5 headings related to previous discussions of adult learning concepts. Currently these findings are based on 11 interviews from the PAC route and 5 taught route students. The research continues with further taught route interviews and any other PAC route participants we were subsequently able to contact.

- 1. Reasons for their selection of a programme: how self-directed was this choice?** The root of this theme is based on the work of Clardy 2000, Merriam 2001, Ellinger 2004

## **A: PAC**

For this route there is a mixed picture of choice. Some, despite their reasonable degree of seniority and professional expertise, were told by their managers that it was an essential qualification to gain; others arrived at that decision for themselves. However there also seemed to be greater consensus amongst the group about the choice of how one gained the qualification. The PAC route was for many the most appropriate choice. Two interviewees identified its lack of exams as important which suggests some previous bad learning experiences.

Janet who already had two post-graduate degrees was from a large public sector organisation. She undertook a CIPD qualification because her manager said it was an ‘essential qualification’. She chose the PAC route because it seemed the most appropriate. Similarly Jane also working in the public sector, encouraged by her manager realised that she had to get ‘some kind or recognised qualification but ‘didn’t want to do exams’. Jane’s (also in a public sector organisation) boss had ‘pushed’ her into it but also many of her colleagues were CIPD qualified so there was a personal push to be professionally credible. Equally the PAC route suited her personal child care needs. Fiona was a reluctant recruit to PAC as she ‘just didn’t want to commit the time and effort’ but she was offered a new role with the caveat that ‘they would only let me do the role if I agreed to do the qualification’. Another interviewee, John, who had served 22 -23 years in the British Army was offered PAC as part of the training programme for re-entry to civilian work having been told some 25 years before that he should get a professional qualification but had not bothered.

On the other hand, Adrian a Chief Executive of a large charity personally opted to undertake a qualification in order to gain the latest knowledge as he was being “sucked into some complex issues, I don’t really have the qualification that gives me authority to take this position”. Returning to HR after a period of absence also motivated one candidate to make

that self-directed choice to opt for PAC. Two of the interviewees had undertaken a foundational taught programme that led to becoming an associate member of CIPD but wanted something different to complete their membership status, something that provided a more directly relevant, practice based approach. For one interviewee this meant not studying something too theoretically based “I absolutely adored my PAC course and for me it was the right way to learn my trade and to put credibility to what I do” Another example Sarah wondered if there were any ‘gaps’ so PAC helped to confirm her expertise and that she was ‘doing the right thing’ a way of gaining confidence that her experiences were legitimate.

Those on the taught route were more consistent in their reasoning for choosing such a route, the key driver of career development was more consistent although it was about equal in terms of those who chose to do it for themselves and those who were encouraged by managers. Specifically one interviewee realised that it would enable her to take on more challenging tasks within her current organisation. Two others recognised that in their organisation formal qualifications were a cultural expectation and accorded status as well as attracting support in terms of fees and/or time. In making the choices, however, the rationale for taught route was due to previous formal education which had not been that long ago so it was a known route, enjoyment of theoretical thinking, the added discipline of attendance in a classroom and the need to gain a ‘civilian’ perspective of HR.

## **2. Learning activities that influenced: are the more autonomous ones more influential?**

(The root of this theme is also based on the work of Clardy 2000, Merriam 200, Ellinger 2004)

A part of being self-directed can be seen from within the umbrella of the PAC route, what each individual student drew from the process differed. One interviewee, Andrew, talked of it as “manna from heaven” as it asked you to prove/provide evidence of what skills and knowledge you already knew plus additional learning. For another it provided an opportunity to look at aspects in depth, at current material and into areas that were new to him such as reward management. For Sarah the reflective exercise highlighted the value of looking back, “drilling into the detail” and learning from past actions, “it helped me to consequence the process, to be able to see it in its entirety and understand why things worked and why they didn’t work”. Preparation for assessment made her ‘think in a more organised way about her work’. In a similar vein Sally noted how reviewing practice had helped her team and was a form of continuous improvement. “I think it is that focus, and in your normal working day you don’t do that, it has to be something outside that triggers that focus”.

This thinking in a more organised way was echoed by other participants. It enabled links and connections between their own activities and outcomes as well as differing aspects of the HR role. The interviewees were all asked about their views of the role of the larger more academically driven but self-selected topic for the management research report (MRR). The competence elements ‘I was relieved to get done’ but I loved the management report’. Many valued this opportunity but this was not universal. Those who particularly enjoyed the opportunity to review practicalities found the MRR difficult because of the degree of reading and conceptual knowledge required. However in probing further with Andrew, this report had been one that was on a topic that became out dated due to a change in law and also the student moved organizations whilst trying to complete it. The enthusiasts tended to have researched a very pertinent piece of work for their practice, for example one, Janet, became a national leading expert (dyslexia) in their area and organisations, another, Fiona, found that she was able to talk very confidently about the topic (homeworking) within their organisation

at an important juncture in their strategic business thinking. One of the participants, James, had had a very different experience to the majority in that he was part of a group going through the process together and it was this group aspect that he noted as being enjoyable; the opportunity to discuss with colleagues. Adrian commented that it was not so much the outcomes but the process that had been important for him as a chief executive.

The taught route provides again a more consistent set of responses. Jill's comment sums up much of their focus spending the afternoon/evening with 20 other HR practitioners "was significantly more important". The group discussions, the networking, were very important as was the structure and discipline. She valued working with others, bouncing ideas, learning and sharing and still keeps in touch with many of the class. 2 of the 5 interviewees noted that the MRR as a self-led project was enjoyable yet another whose background was less academic found the reading hard and nearly did not complete the MRR. This student also supported the value of the challenge of discussion and the "conversational forum". For Celia the learning was more in how she managed her interactions with the employees and managers: "As a result of especially the MRR (on coaching) I have become "more conscious of what I am saying, I think a lot more before I speak because I know the impact of what I say can be quite significant". It improved her ability to give advice.

### **3. Changing mind sets shape shifting or reconstructing perceptions of self through**

**learning.**(The root for this aspect is based on the work of Taylor 2006, Fenwick 2008)

Writing the PAC narrative helped Sarah to understand her role and be able to describe it more effectively to others. Sally reviewed her perceptions of the wider picture of HR, "I don't look at something in isolation I see it in HR advisors that very excellent people that I work with and they see something in isolation and I don't believe I saw it, when you look at yourself, I

don't believe that I was quite as insular as that. I do see more now of the bigger picture which very much sits with the CIPD view that HR should sit at the top table” For the candidates who went through the PAC process as a small group one in particular found that he had been made to feel a fraud” by one or two people in Germany a “chancer who fell into the job” despite long experience in the job as he did not have qualification. Once he had gained his qualification he was told to put it on his correspondence and people's reactions were different, his personal and others perceptions of credibility became more positive. It has made him feel he has more of that (in his view) essential ingredient of a good HR professional ‘gravitas’. Adrian on the other hand recognised that very few of the other chief executives in the organisation had ever really focused on HR but interestingly he noted that he felt he preferred the management style of those who had.

From the taught route, Jill noted that the programme and the group interaction provided her with much greater confidence to push and to ask for more responsibility in her organisation. This was a similar experience for others especially for Sam and Celia whose organisations valued qualifications and gave people more status as a result of them. For Sam this was even more so when she gained her chartered fellowship level of membership. With Celia, it was more of a personal feeling of now being equal to her qualified colleagues. For James the programme made him more of a critical thinker and more importantly his willingness to challenge helped him realise why he had struggled in the military at times – he was a person who loved to challenge. The course provided the confidence to challenge further , where to go for further information and to operate with more strategic influence, able to add value i.e. his opinions were now backed up by sound knowledge. He feels very proud of his achievements as he had very little formal post school qualifications. Chris is currently in a data processing role part time but the programme made her realise how important HR and CIPD is to her as a career and how it enhances credibility.

#### **4. Learning as tool for raising their profile and increasing their influence or power (**

The root for this perspective is based on the work of Fenwick 2008)

This theme is very closely related to theme 3 but it seemed useful to identify any specific examples of increasing influence or power as a result of either programme. Again a common response is the recognition of the qualification being a valuable asset in certain types of organisations and creating a sense of equality with qualified colleagues. Such equality then enables them to feel more able to influence and advise. “I’m one of your gang now”.

Similarly the role of confidence in giving people a feeling of being more powerful comes through participants John and Jane’s experiences of boardroom or senior team discussions, being able to “look the managing director in the eye” and argue the HR corner more effectively than prior to the course even though Jane had been selected to join this newly formed organisation from the outset so began with a strong power base. John on the other hand feels sufficiently confident to attempt to change the current company culture. Another student found that the MRR format was appreciated by his managers so became the basis of further reports. The content of the qualification also provided the knowledge to develop their influence. For example Sally noted that “I was also looking at how this could be done better as I was benchmarking against best practice” For Sally PAC made “me more of HR professional and less of an administrator, felt stronger for having the external facing recognition and therefore able to encourage own team to gain the qualification”.

As noted in theme 2 for Janet the impact (of the MRR) was more than just a personal profile raiser. The implementation of its findings saved £30,000 for her organisation, contributed to a culture change and made it (and her) a national leader in the field. On the other hand an organisational restructuring put her in the position of being a threat to her colleagues as she



now was as qualified as they were so she could apply for their jobs, too. An example of both positive and negative power influences. .

John found that the qualification meant that in his current civilian job, staff who are students now ask him for help and guidance. It had also helped in relationships with the head and other staff of a failing school where he had to become involved in his previous role. For example, the Head teacher kept them waiting, was generally dismissive and asked what qualifications they had to tell him what to do in his school; however the Head became more cooperative when he learnt of their professional memberships.

The taught route students were generally more junior than the PAC participants but again confidence to influence, to advise, to challenge, to negotiate with external suppliers and to act up to head of HR were all aspects of how the qualification can create a stronger professional persona and help them to raise their own profiles.

#### **5. Personal and organisational constraints, motivations and incentives to learning: the SDL context. (The root for this aspect is based on the work of Taylor 2006)**

From a personal perspective there were a number of constraints, some confusion and concerns for the learning environment. For example; there was discord between what Margaret read of HR in professional journals and her own experience. She found it difficult to relate what she described as ‘CIPD speak’ to her 12 years of work experience. Sarah had been hurt by a colleague’s comment that the PAC route was an easier route “it was not doing it for real”.

However PAC suited Adrian, our Chief Executive, as he did not want to be an elder statesman in the classroom. A personal barrier for him was making the time to fit the evidence gathering and research into his high profile role. During his studies he had also had to manage a major rebuilding project to extend the regional base of the charity's facilities. However he was considering undertaking the masters' qualification and undertaking PAC at a University gave him not only individual support but flexibility and access to resources.

The learning context provided an incentive too in that the University setting for PAC provided a "kind of gravitas for Sarah and similarly Sally found that "a university setting is more objective than a business one, there is a standard" and it is more supportive.

For a number of participants of which Sharon is an example, commented that the specific learning activities (as noted in section 2 above) became both their personal motivation and incentive but also that the MRR, in particular was an opportunity for the business to gain value; "the business was really grateful for it". This was the reward that motivated her to complete it. She still shares the work with others and gained great satisfaction. Our participant from Germany, John, realised that he couldn't get back to England and into civilian HR work without the qualification and the PAC route meant that he didn't have to give up working to study full time or spend time with younger students. Another ex-military candidate, Richard, considered it "made him more efficient and hungrier for ensuring he kept up to date on developments and current changes".

For the taught students the organisational opportunity for support such as fees and time seems to feature more in their conversation. Where the organisations consider qualifications important, for example for Sam and Celia, the only real constraints was the need to fit their full time job demands around the programme demands. However job changes plus family life

made some of the assessments harder to undertake especially where such an assignment was based on the previous job role as James suggested.

## **Conclusions**

The literature on adult learning makes some play around the maturity of such learners and it is this maturity that provides the motivation for self-direction and choice of learning route. Our interviewees strengthen this to some extent in that PAC candidates are generally older with more years' experience and so opt for a learning methodology that both validates that experience but provides direct work related development. Their responses suggest a shorter career horizon in which to gain the recognition they consider they need for as a result of moving organisations and roles, for example from private to public or military to civilian. However a number are not entirely self-directed as there are comments about being encouraged or pushed by their senior managers rather than as Clardy (2000) suggests making a completely voluntary choice.

Although growing confidence is an aspect of learning that is highlighted throughout the learning literature this research not only reflects that issue but our participants' stories also indicate how that confidence is demonstrated. It is evident that their understanding of their own professional identity (see Nichols and Williams 2012, 2013) develops and this changed mindset impacts on their influence and power. There are examples from the participants' stories that demonstrate their greater influence in the boardroom and greater capacity to give advice to their internal and external clients. There has also been external recognition, career advancement and, greater equality with other qualified colleagues although one PAC participant did note that equality for her happened in a downsizing situation a double edged sword as it created tension between herself and previously friendly colleagues. A further example of the impact of the learning is a shift in approach and the ability to bring greater

criticality or thinking more carefully before responding to questions from internal and external clients.

The taught programme participants particularly emphasised the role of the group discussions, action learning sets, networking and the chance to hear how the wider world conducts its HR activities. Interestingly this was also noted by the one PAC interviewee who had been part of a small homogenous group funded to undertake the programme as part of the military training available. Wenger's concepts of communities of practice seem especially important in developing professional confidence and identity. The lesson perhaps then is that with many work based programmes being lone individuals or single organisations limited opportunities are created for such communities and networking which may impact on the totality of the learning to be gained. Some of the taught students engaged with the CIPD Branch network but this was rare for the PAC candidates as noted in Nichols and Williams (2013). Given this commentary on the value of CoPs HRD practitioners could provide all learners with a more supportive climate and networking forums within and across organisations.

There is evidence for our PAC participants as well as the taught students that engaging with the University environment as their source of learning seems to have given the process added value. Organisations and HRD practitioners may note this when considering the up skilling and development of their staff.

The PAC students, however who did not experience group discussions did not identify its absence as an issue for them. The problems in studying differed between the work based and taught learners. Taught students expressed more tensions with their full time job roles, suggesting that they externalised barriers to learning as manifesting in organisational constraints. PAC candidates in contrast mainly mentioned personal choices such as its

suitability for their circumstances; not being an elder statesman, fitting in with child care, complimented their degree of experience and competence. This suggests a more internalised response to their motivations, incentives and barriers to learning. Further evidence of this response can be seen in an emotional response to a colleague's comment that "it hurt" when that colleague commented that PAC was an easier route.

Work based learning seems to be a much more self-driven choice for our PAC participants whereas for taught students the perception is that learning is something that they must do and they must be sent somewhere to do it. They see the acquisition of professional qualifications as something to be gained outside the organisation however much they use the organisation to complete their assessments. These findings suggest in their initial choice of mode of study that they are not particularly self-directed. However the picture is more complicated as looking back over their experiences the taught students highlight in their key learning activities the MRR or the group discussions i.e. the more self-directed activities.

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## Appendix 1:

Major Code	Subcodes
1 The Professional HR role (TPHRR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Other's perception of HR</li> <li>2 Management perceptions of HR</li> <li>3 Essential HR skills and knowledge</li> <li>4 Being a professional</li> <li>5 Structure of HR</li> </ul>
2 My role/ career (MRC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Title</li> <li>2 Professional focus</li> <li>3 Entry into HR</li> <li>4 Time in HR,</li> <li>5 Redundancy</li> <li>6 Prior qualifications</li> </ul>
3 Mentors and Organisational influences (MOI)	
4 Why become qualified (WBQ)	1 Chartered membership
5 Experience of PAC/PG Dip (EP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reasons for choice</li> <li>2 Reflection (and other activities that were influential)</li> <li>3 Assessment (influence on learning)</li> <li>4. Constraints and supports.</li> </ul>
6 Influence of learning and qualification on professional formation, role and career (ILQPFRC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Other's perception of me on qualification</li> <li>2 My perception of me (shape shifting/reconstructing self-perception)</li> <li>3 Impact on the development of my role and career ( changes in influence and profile)</li> </ul>