It's like having to trade on the personal:

Changing work, changing identities of public health learning and development practitioners

Rob Wilkins

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Certificate of Authorship and Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have had in my research work and in the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all the information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Rob Wilkins

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Abstract

As a practitioner involved in the planning and development of educational activities in the field of public health, I have worked within many pedagogical traditions and program parameters. Through this work, I have experienced both subtle and radical shifts in the range of skills, knowledge and relationships required to collaboratively plan and evaluate educational work. In this professional and community-based landscape, competing and often overlapping models of education and evaluation have led to much conceptual confusion and ambiguity around narrowly defined notions of best practice, evidence and knowledge legitimacy.

Drawing from Dorothy Smith's (1999) standpoint theory from which my inquiry was developed as a result of my participation with colleagues in the field, I explore how three professional practice networks of learning and development practitioners speak of the skills, knowledge, relationships and worker identities in a changing field. This research seeks to explicate the kinds of informal and largely unarticulated knowledge that is produced through the changing contexts of work.

This research maps the changing conditions of educational work through my own case stories of educational practice and uses these as a springboard for discussion among three diverse professional practice networks. The Story/Dialogue Method (S/D-M) developed by Labonte and Feather (1996), is a constructivist methodological approach that, in this application, structures group dialogue into reflective insights and theories about how educational work occurs in varied settings among different professional and community-based groups.

A strong reliance on interpersonal skills was articulated by all three networks to build trust, assess individual and organisational learning needs, to build partnerships and to motivate learners. Skills were often described vaguely and summarised as a series of situational specific attributes. A valuing of reflexive, working knowledge as opposed to professional or discipline-based expertise was raised as an important aspect of partnership building and in negotiating program parameters. The need to build individual and organisational relationships through formal and informal encounters was cited as a series of legitimate yet often 'behind the scenes' professional practices. Aligning with the notion of worker identity described by Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant and Yates (2003) as process, practitioners spoke of their identities as constructed and temporary, negotiated through newly emerging roles and changing relationships with peers and learners.

This study suggests that evidence-based practice is a contested term drawing its meanings from multiple theoretical and pedagogical traditions including that of intuition. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, evidence guiding educational approaches is viewed as a pragmatic and eclectic mix of tools stored to be adapted for use in new ways. Additionally, this study concludes that all participants (including myself) regard educational practice as a collaborative and continually negotiated endeavour.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Professional Starting Point: Public Health Learning and Development 1

Who does education in public health? 2

Who is the public health workforce? 2

Exploring worker and learner identities – a case study 4

Chapter 2 — Public Health, Learning and Evidence: Exploring multiple perspectives of evidence and educational practice 10

Defining public health: From a branch of medicine to an eclectic mix of evidences, approaches and theories 10

The new public health: Workforces with multiple traditions 11

Evidence-based knowledge: A contested term 12

The broadening public health workforce 17

Towards multiple notions of best practice 18

Change within a field of public health: Health promotion 19

Guiding frameworks: Capacity building and the rhetoric of partnerships 24

Knowledge development through multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral collaboration 27

Chapter 3 — Mapping My Professional Histories: A case study in changing pedagogical traditions 29

HIV/AIDS Community Development and Peer Education Officer 29

Radical education within a community development program 31

The significance of gay identity within HIV/AIDS education 33

Professional Development Officer 34

Training versus a broader workforce development agenda 36

Hepatitis C Workforce Development Project Officer 37

Learning through participatory management development approaches 38

Action learning with multi-disciplinary teams 39

Evaluating action learning through participatory methods: How do we know what works? 42

Facilitating problem-based learning: A shift in worker identity 43

Workforce Development Senior Project Manager 45

Horizontal learning: Facilitating collaborative learning relationships 45

Public health policy and discourses of learning as organisational performativity 47

Facilitating knowledge production through professional practice networks 49

Chapter 4 — Methodological Framework 53

Professional practice networks as a unit of analysis 55

Drawing from communities of practice 54

Participatory action research and the Story-Dialogue Method 56

Professional practice networks — recruitment 58

The Story-Dialogue Method 60

Methodological overview 64

Chapter 5 — Analysis 67

HepLink Story-Dialogue Method Workshop 68

The practice of relationship building 70

Educational frameworks and professional practice 72

Assessing learner needs 73

Worker identities and learner expectations 74

Evaluating our practice 75

HepLink Summary 74

NADA Story-Dialogue Method Workshop 77

The practice of relationship building 77

Educational frameworks and professional practice 78

Organisational development as education 79

Assessing learner needs 80

Worker identities and learner expectations 81

NADA summary 81

Midwifery Story Dialogue Method Workshop 82

Describing midwifery as a historical / political movement 84

Midwifery practice development through role modelling 84

Midwifery relationship building through persuasion 86

Midwifery – "with woman" (worker learner identities) 87

Midwifery summary 88

Summary of contrasting themes within three professionalpractice networks 88

Skills, knowledge, relationships and worker identities 91

Skills 91

Knowledge 92

Relationships 93

Worker identities 94

Chapter 6 — Conclusion **96**

Implications for future practitioner-led research 99

Implications for my professional practice 99

References **101**

Appendices **108**

i. Hepatitis C Action Learning — Mapping Tools

ii. Hepatitis C Action Learning — Organisational Planning Tools

iii. HepLink Case Stories 1 and 2, Insights and Theory Notes

iv. NADA Case Stories 1 and 2, Insights and Theory Notes

v. Midwives' Case Stories 1 and 2, Insights and Theory Notes