It’s like having to trade on the personal: Changing work, changing identities of public health learning and development practitioners

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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.

Signature of Candidate

[Signature]

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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.
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