

Yes but no but yes – students straddling the change process in Community Service Work.

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Abstract

This paper presents the feedback from students, teachers and community workers on the impact of studying community services work in the Vocational Education and Training sector. Changes and challenges to students were identified by all participant groups. The community services sector is a soft discipline area, requiring students to develop the ability to understand themselves, the clients and society. The work is built on interpersonal relationships between worker and client carried out within professional boundaries. Teachers and community workers reported the issues facing students in having their beliefs, values, opinions and sense of self challenged with new knowledge. Assimilating the new knowledge frequently had affective impacts on students and emotional responses and resistance to change were common. Students it was reported, would frequently demonstrate being in liminal states, beginning to change, denying and resisting until they were able to fully assimilate new ways of being and seeing the discipline. Student reports indicated significant impacts and changes to their outlooks, beliefs and values. However, students regularly denied the significance of transformations occurring, indicating they may be in liminal states as they straddled change while internalising new knowledge.

Keywords: Community services, Vocational Education and Training, liminality,

Background

This paper will present initial findings from a small scale research project in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector related to the learning of students in

Community Service Work courses. The project utilized a threshold concepts framework to explore and analyze reports from students of changes within themselves, with particular regard to the intellectual and personal changes relating to the discipline knowledge during their course of study. Data on observations of changes in students by teachers and community service managers/workers was also collected.

Individual interviews were conducted with students, teachers and employers in Community Service Work courses in Vocational Education and Training. The courses included nationally accredited qualifications for the following sectors: Youth Work, Community Services, Community Development, Mental Health, and Alcohol & Other Drugs; the students were studying at Certificate IV and/or Diploma level. While qualifications are not required in all community services work sectors in Australia mandatory minimum qualifications are being introduced in many of them. In the sectors named above there appears to be a move towards a Certificate IV level course as the basic qualification for workers.

Exploration of the data collected in these interviews highlighted some interesting oscillations in the students' reports of changes within themselves. They were reporting significant changes on one hand, yet seemed to deny any changes to what they considered to be their core beliefs and values, and appeared to be unaware of any contradictions in their positions. A number of the students stated that the course did not so much change them as provide them with theoretical evidence to support their previous beliefs/ positions, however were this the case it would be reasonable to assume they would not be reporting significant changes in their lives. The oscillating between acknowledgment of change is indicative of being in a state of liminality "which can be seen to perform a progressive function which begins with the encountering and integration of something new" (Land, 2013). The instability of the liminal state, where ontological positions shift, is the space where students can engage in the mastery of subject or discipline knowledge and concepts which may prove to be problematic (Cousin, 2006).

Methods

Eight students were interviewed individually for this small-scale intensive project, (a larger focus group was held with twenty students, and while not as intense it indicated

some similar views to the individual interviews—but did not highlight the contradictory positions that came out in the more in-depth interviews). Five teachers and five community sector workers/managers were interviewed individually for this project. The individual students were mainly female which reflects the work environment, although this is definitely changing. All students were aged between thirty and fifty five years of age. Although these courses do attract younger students aged from eighteen years the average age of students is over thirty years. Included in the interviewees were: an international student; two students with a disability; two who had left school before year 10 (under 16 years of age); and two with university education. All had completed the Certificate IV (some had completed Certificate IV awards in a few sectors) and were completing their Diploma/ Advanced Diploma courses. A couple had completed their Diplomas already.

The teachers interviewed taught across the courses and all had community services experiences, with three who still worked in the community services sector. The workers/managers were experienced across youth work, disability, community work, community development, mental health and alcohol and other drugs. All interviews were recorded and written up and sent out to the respondents to add to, alter or clarify, before analysis began. No person interviewed made changes to what was reported, but some did add information and opinions on the subject topic.

Results:

Student interviews

While there was a reasonable level of diversity in motives for coming to do the study, all but one student mentioned a strong interest in working in the field. The motives ranged from improving work prospects to giving back to those in need because the student themselves or a close friend or relative had problems that required assistance from one or more of the community services sectors. They hoped to learn skills to enable them to gain employment in the field.

What first alerted me to the extent of personal changes that took place in students and the level of denial of the impact of the course discipline knowledge on student's beliefs, attitudes and views was the comments by Student A. This student believed that had she not done the course she would have ended her own life; coming to the course gave her acceptance and she learned about her condition and how to step back and look at her issues. Yet Student A also claimed that "I haven't had any information presented to me that has completely changed my core beliefs". The comments by this student were quite strong and appear to demonstrate significant changes, moving from a position of wanting to end your life because you absolutely believed it was not going to change and was not able to be changed to one where you realize your situation is controllable and changeable, yet she believed this was incidental to the study.

Student A and several others commented on how the course had provided them with evidence or theories to support their views: "The course made me realise the feelings that I had before, now I had the academic evidence to support it and e.g. this is supported by legislation blah blah, this theory proves blah blah blah etc. Now my feelings/beliefs about human rights, value and worth and how to approach people are now supported and validated by evidence"(Student A). "I only strengthened my abilities and attitudes, evidence based research now impacts my beliefs and assumptions, I now make different choices on evidence, but it didn't change me" (Student B), "I changed a bit, but have a strong moral background, this course reinforced me" (Student C).

Students regularly spoke of changes to their beliefs, attitudes, abilities and views during the interviews but would often counter these comments and claim they had not really changed at all. The interviews were populated with 'Yes, But' statements, "Yes I have changed significantly, but I haven't really changed at all". Students noted the things they learned and how it impacted on them, particularly learning to critically reflect on their own positions and beliefs and learning how to use evidence based research (EBR). Quite a few commented on the impact of learning EBR and how this changed their decision making processes and often views and opinions. Some stated they no longer accepted what others said as truth just because of their perceived status as a minister of their church, or a television presenter, or a family member. They claimed they now asked people making statements as facts to provide the evidence, and they could now use this to make informed decisions and opinions.

Mostly the students were able to identify how they saw things differently now in relation to people in need, and how they had changed their own perspectives and attitudes towards clients within community services sectors. Yet most of the students, I interviewed seemed to be unaware that the changes to their affective states were possibly a result of assimilating new information from the course. All students commented that they learned to be self-reflective, and this allowed them to unpack their own positions and they used Evidence Based Research to examine information, which inevitably changed how they considered things and made decisions. Most commented on the skills they learned. They definitely reported an increased confidence and that now they could identify as community service workers even if not yet employed (however most were employed in some capacity, whether voluntary work, casual or full time by the end of their course).

The element most students appeared to miss was the connections between what they had learned and the processes of assimilating this into themselves, apparently seeing change as incidental or a side product of their learning journey. Only two students in this small sample size demonstrated a clear sense of meta-cognition in the learning process and were able to identify they were aware of having moved through a liminal state, both had considerable experience in casual or paid work in the community services field which may have contributed to this process.

In responding to the write up from the interviews not one student commented on the contradictions in their interviews or asked for changes to what they said, some added in bits, but no changes were requested. They appeared not to notice any apparent contradictions. One reason for this could be that the students are still in a liminal state, not fully assimilated into the discipline and for some not fully ready to let go of the old ways. It appeared important to most of the students that they stated they had not changed at a core level rather seeing the course as reinforcing what they already believed even while stating the changes to their core beliefs/ attitudes/ opinions etc. This could indicate that the students have not yet made the learning leap as described by Kiley and Wisker (2010), where students cross the conceptual threshold and this “can alter the learner’s approaches to, and perceptions of learning in the subject and often of learning itself”(p. 399). Are these oscillating student perspectives a sign of insecurity, does acknowledging change invalidate their previous positions and mark

them as wrong, or are they still hovering before taking the final step through the portal? The oscillating is indicative of being in a state of liminality “which can be seen to perform a progressive function which begins with the encountering and integration of something new” (Land, 2013). The instability of the liminal state, where ontological positions shift, is the space where students can engage in the mastery of subject or discipline knowledge and concepts which may prove to be problematic (Cousin, 2006). Students will leave the liminal state when they have assimilated and understood the new knowledge and developed new ways of thinking and seeing the discipline.

Community service worker/manager interviews

A number of Workers who managed staff and supervised students on placement in the community services sectors were interviewed and they claimed that they could often see changes or the beginning of changes taking place in students during placements. Also these workers interviewed were able to reflect back and identify how they themselves had changed through their own studies and experience of working in the area and clearly identified the affective changes that took place while assimilating the skills and knowledge they were learning. Most believed that they changed in attitudes, beliefs and opinions including how they felt about social issues, clients and themselves.

Managers claimed that the process of changing perspectives, beliefs and attitudes, did take time and often presented the learner with emotional challenges. They commented that students on placement or new workers would often have to confront their own emotional reactions to the clients-worker relationship and the boundaries and ethics of the work which would require support and debriefing by managers and acceptance and potential change by the students. Managers agreed that indications of changes or readiness to change in students or new workers was often most evident in those students/workers who asked questions and discussed their beliefs and opinions openly and this seemed to be key in assisting them to both grasp the work and change their outlooks. However, the discussions often indicated that the students were in various stages of change, at times resisting and denying and at times showing a breakthrough where they were able to move forward.

It is common for people to say they want to study and work in community services because they know someone who has had problems or they have had experiences

themselves. This frequently leads to the student focusing a lot on their own selves and at times missing the perspective of the client. A sign of positive change in students or new workers managers claim is where they move from talking about and focusing on their own experiences, perspectives and opinions, this change allows them to better relate to clients and focus on their needs.

Teacher interviews

Teachers interviewed noted that students frequently struggled with letting go of old beliefs, and attitudes seeing them oscillating between positions. Teachers claimed that at times some students were projecting what others expected of them rather than what they actually believed and this took time to change, mimicking rather than embodying the principals of the work. Teachers offered support for students to work through changes in their positions, beliefs, and values but that it took time to assimilate information and accept that change was safe so they could let go of the old ways of thinking and feeling. Teachers noted that ethics, boundaries, understanding power balance in the client- worker relationship were important for students to grasp and often took time to learn as they inevitable led to a change of perspective. Similar to observations by community service workers/managers teachers noted that one indication that students were 'getting' it was they stopped focusing on their own issues and were able to let these fall into the background and not dominate their interactions with the discipline content.

Conclusions

Students coming into VET courses do so for a myriad of reasons and there is diversity in students within community services courses in age, educational background and socio-economic status and life experiences. The students range from just out of school, to older people retraining for a new career, to people who left school at age fourteen and who are returning to study in their middle years; from reformed addicts to people struggling with addictions, people who were in the welfare system to people who had no experience or idea of the community services sector. And diversity within individual learners as Meyer (2012) points out means they are not expected to experience

internalization of transformative concepts in the same way, and that variations will occur due to their “level of prior knowledge, experience, and disciplinary background “(p. 8). This diversity was quite evident in the students interviewed, and most demonstrated they had not fully internalized the transformations and were still in liminal states, straddling change.

The nature of community services where the work is built around interpersonal relationships between worker and client, awareness of professional boundaries/ethics, awareness of the impact of socio-cultural, economic and political climates on the clients, may prove difficult for students to assimilate while it may also make identifying threshold concepts problematic. The disciplines require of the student an ability to understand themselves, the client, and society at a conceptual level, and to be able to relate personally and professionally and there would appear to be affective states that must be managed to do this successfully. Walker (2012) notes, threshold concepts “maybe small and nuanced just as much as they can be large and significant”(p. 251) and in community services success may involve the internalisation of both small and large concepts. The community services work course area is definitely a 'soft discipline' which will impact on or change the cognitive and affective states of the learner and as Cousin (2006) notes in reference to learning the idea of 'otherness' in Cultural Studies where it requires a level of personal engagement by the student, where what the student learns will form new understandings and have an impact on how they feel and who they are. Atherton, Hadfield and Meyers (2008) have also offered examples from the research that posit some 'threshold concepts' as “articles of faith which are more affective than cognitive, to be believed as much as understood” (p. 11). They argue that these serve the same end, functioning as “portals to new areas of knowledge, integrating other ideas, and defining the boundaries of the discipline or the belief system”(p. 11).

Students in this study predominantly demonstrated they were in a liminal state, identifying significant changes on one hand while denying significant changes at core levels. Most appeared unaware of the impact of learning on themselves, lacking a sense of metacognition, seeing learning as apart from rather than forming the self. They did not identify any fear of letting go of their core selves or beliefs, as most denied there were changes to these things despite their reports of major and significant changes in their lives. The opinions of the students may change as they move into the community services sector as workers or further their study, as was the case for the two

students who were able to acknowledge the changes that occurred within themselves as a result of their study.

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