ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER*

Unveiling the Unforeseen: Researchers' learning from a collaboration examining learner agency in vocational education across Canada, Denmark and New Zealand

Steve Henry, M.EnvEd[a], Emma Smith, PhD[b], Ginger Grant, PhD, Jan Hendrik Roodt, PhD[a], Lisa Anketell, M.Ed[b], Niels Bjerre Tange, PhD[c], Thomas Iskov, PhD[c]

[a]Otago Polytechnic, [b]Humber Polytechnic, [c]VIA University College

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Abstract

A group of researchers have collaborated for three years to explore learner agency across vocational contexts in Canada, Denmark, and New Zealand. To investigate the learning from this collaboration, participants carried out a collaborative autoethnography. Participants wrote their perspectives and themes, which were distilled. What emerged is a community of practice that has generated unexpected trust and depth. The cultural exchange and diversity-building have changed previous views of each other's practices. There has been significant personal and professional growth for all participants. The collaboration has led to an increased criticality, something all participants noted would not have been possible without the freedom to be candid about the challenges and changes they face in their home contexts. What began as an inquiry into learner agency has resulted in the researchers becoming the unexpected learners by unveiling unforeseen insights into their own practices.

Introduction and Context

This paper articulates the unexpected learning from the collaboration between researchers from three countries in the area of Student-Centred Learning (SCL). We came together as a part of the Global Polytechnic Alliance between the vocational institutions where we each work in Canada, Denmark, and New Zealand. This alliance seeks to foster a shared exchange of ideas, programmes, and carry out joint research projects. In response to a call for research into SCL by our institutions' executives, our group connects virtually and (at times) in person. We first met in 2022, as described elsewhere (Roodt et al. 2022) and explored how we could move toward a joint research agenda for delivering professional practice programmes on the basis of the SCL review that makes sense both from a comparative perspective and from three individual, institutional viewpoints. We limited our numbers to two participants from each institution to build trust in a smaller group.

***Original Research Papers** are papers that report on original empirical research with a focus on teaching and learning. Papers may be qualitative or quantitative and include an Abstract, Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, and Reference section, as well as any tables and/or figures.

Early in the collaboration, we identified learner agency as a suitable research topic because it appeared to be an appropriate response to the interest of increasing complexity in our education programmes in every institution. In Denmark, the European Union was pressing for a policy on student-centred learning, which was shaping future funding using a measured learning outcome approach, a significant change for Danish vocational education. In Canada, a reframe of research and its place in the institution and in industry partnerships was getting more complex. For the New Zealanders, this was a chance to test learner-centred practices with international colleagues and learn how to articulate this for an audience that does not usually have the learner at the centre. We define learner agency as the capacity to act independently and to make one's own choices (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019). As a pedagogical approach, the purpose of learner agency is broader, including deeper transformational learning, critical and humanist education and whole-person learning (Hoidn & Reusser, 2021).

To guide our exploration of learner agency, we turned to the concept of autoethnography, a methodological approach that invites all participants to delve into our own experiences and reflective narratives. As we shared and continued to exchange our individual stories and experiences, we anticipate discovering mutual patterns and distinctions. It is through this collective sensemaking that we aim to understand the multiple meanings of agency so that we may bring our new understanding and insights into the work we undertake with all learners. We recognize that we all have multiple social identities that we bring to the discussion, including our learners. It is essential for research to acknowledge that we all belong to multiple social categories (Gaither, 2018, p. 443). In order to understand the complexity inherent in student agency and student voice, we needed to experience that complexity ourselves. We realized our different cultures, traditions and research lenses offer the potential for new learning opportunities that arise from our interactions. This paper examines the learning that occurred for the researchers and how it has impacted their practice, with the hope that it is of value to other researchers considering scholarly collaborations across the world. The purpose of the paper is to share our unexpected agency as researchers with the hope that others find value in understanding what we learn. We continue to be advocates for global collaborations on teaching practices and research.

Literature

In navigating the challenges posed by an ever-evolving world, higher education institutions face pressing questions regarding their form and purpose (Friday & Halloran, 2019). The urgency of these inquiries is underscored by voices suggesting an escalating disruption of late modernity, deeming current educational responses inadequate. Projections from the World Economic Forum (2020) indicate a future where the majority of students will engage in jobs that do not exist today, and almost half of today's jobs will be automated within the next decade. Additionally, more than half of the content in graduate degrees is expected to lose relevance within five years from 2020.

Central to such change is the historic assumption in formal education that learners are taught rather than having the agency to learn and become independent. Changes in technology are resulting in learners expecting to have more say in where and how their learning occurs. Cascio (2020) posits that we are entering an age of chaos, framing it as Brittle, Anxious, Non-Linear, and Incomprehensible (BANI). The context of education is rapidly changing. Abegglen et al. (2023) contribute to the discourse by urging acknowledgment of the super complexity of education in the 21st century. They highlight the persistence of outdated faculty practices and languages, forming silos of knowledge into which students are inculcated. This approach is not only disrespectful but also prepares them for professional practices that no longer exist.

Smith (2020) argues that the stability of education delivery has bred overconfidence, overpricing, and an overreliance on business models tailored to the physical world. Sparkes (2016) further contextualizes this phenomenon as a "reculturing" within an audit culture framed by market-driven imperatives. The linear model of formal education, as described by Biggs and Collis (2014), positions the teacher on the outside and the learner on the inside of a relatively closed system, fostering an obedient subjectivity. Ings (2017) challenges this obedient learning, advocating for a more creative, open space described as an "unflattening" of learning (Sousanis, 2015).

Moravec's (2008) paradigms of education, evolving from linear instruction (Education 1.0) to expert-centred (Education 2.0), facilitator (Education 3.0), and finally to Education 4.0 where the learner and their context are at

the centre, underlining the shift towards individual learner agency. Responding to complexity with expanded meaning structures, as suggested by Covey (2021), becomes imperative for understanding ourselves, others, and solving complex social problems. The swift adjustments made by institutions during the global pandemic in 2020 illustrate the potential for quick change (Eisenstein, 2020; Hess, 2020).

Grocott (2022) contends that transformative learning necessitates an embodied, cognitive, and social experience, with significant shifts occurring at the margins and within the intrapersonal realm. Thomassen (2016) describes this liminal space as a critical intermediary zone that facilitates transitions from previous ways of knowing to future states. Liminality refers to periods of transition during which "the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction, and destruction" (Thomassen, 2016, p. 1). Researchers in this collaboration have observed such moments in their learning processes.

The exploration of liminal spaces and the transformative learning literature indicates that adult learners undergo a transformation when they encounter disorienting dilemmas, engage in critical reflection, and take action (Mezirow, 2000; Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006; Schnepfleitner & Ferreira, 2021). However, despite the anecdotal evidence from this collaborative journey, there is a conspicuous absence of a formal process to systematically examine these changes.

So, we asked how we could best capture our collective learning together. How does our collaboration influence our practice and our workplaces? Research by Hökkä et al. (2017) points to the importance of addressing individual narratives and learning pathways in seeking to understand emergent collective agency and identity in professional contexts.

Autoethnography (Adams et al., 2022) emerges as a suitable method for researchers interested in exploring personal experiences, emotions, and self-accountability. It involves describing and systematically analyzing personal interactions and observations to understand cultural phenomena. The collaborative autoethnographic approach operates as a community of 'we' (Spry, 2011; Harris & Holman Jones, 2021), influencing all researchers to pause together in reflexivity. Transformation in collaborative ethnography begins at the individual level (Hernandez et al., 2022, p. 66). This moment allows the researcher to intentionally position themselves and their lived experiences within the larger conversation or analysis at hand. This collaborative model shifts from an individual to a collective focus, offering personally engaging, accessible research that makes an impact (Lapadat, 2017).

Reflective practice, as suggested by Dewey (2005), initiates with a felt difficulty, mirroring the real problems and tensions faced by researchers in navigating learner agency amid conflicting educational traditions. To connect to larger social and cultural meanings, these moments of pause and refocus must be deliberately and regularly exercised within the researcher's process. Piaget's (1967) assertion that individuals learn through intellectual resolution further strengthens the reflective aspect.

Community or collaborative autoethnography is an emic (insider) methodology of multivocal sharing or pooling of experiences and thoughts by individuals captured systematically (Martin et al., 2022). This community autoethnography is "a relationship-making activity among researchers who participate in and co-construct each other's existence" (Toyosaki et al., 2009, p. 59). This has been a consistent outcome for us having met for more than two years before meeting in person. We have shared lived experiences on pre-identified sociocultural phenomena and collaboratively analyzed and interpreted them for commonalities and differences (Hernandez et al., 2017). This led to increasing trust and comfort in deeper sharing, the result being a communal sense of real experience (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), which is how we, as the author researchers, feel about our unique encounter with each other. Ethically, we never sought explicit permission to share; rather, it emerged from our deepening trusting relationship. This aligns with recent studies with teachers, which have highlighted the importance of making sense of one's personal histories and experiences and of one's role within a particular community for the development of professional identity (Kayi-Ayder, 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016).

We each share a long-term relationship with our formal education institutions, where change is not always welcomed. As academics examining a marginal activity, we are often denied space to examine our feelings, including anxiety, to

negotiate a reflexive, ethical and scholarly self (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2022). Being a researcher in this changing BANI environment drives our inquiry together as to how best to enable ourselves and our learners to thrive.

Methods

Participants met online for two years prior to meeting in person in July 2023. At this first face-to-face meeting, each participant answered a series of mutually designed questions. From these narratives, themes were then analyzed.

The questions were:

1. Introduce yourself, the role you are in, at what institution, and your research interests.
2. Why did you choose to participate in this international collaboration on Student-Centred Learning?
3. How has it been, and what have been the key moments in the collaboration for you?
4. What have you learnt through this collaboration?
5. What are the impacts of this learning on your professional practice?

Themes arising

We considered the five main themes that emerged from the responses to the questions. These are supported by a short narrative followed by respective quotes in red italics.

1. **Safety, Trust and Community Building:** Researchers felt liberated, able to express themselves freely in contrast to the constraints they experienced in their respective organizational environments.

   "Trust between us was established quickly, much to my surprise and delight."

   "I felt safe expressing both doubt and fears"

2. **Personal and Professional Growth:** Reflective journeys unfold within the collaborative space, shaping personal and professional perspectives on teaching, research, and educational practices.

   "Engaging in dialogue with other understandings and knowledge that challenge one's own is arguably the essence of academic work."

3. **Educational Challenges and Innovations:** Recognition of challenges in post-pandemic education prompts exploration of new methodologies and paradigms, highlighting a commitment to innovation.

   "Introduce challenging thoughts."

   "Sharing disruptive concepts, especially when discussing radical change in large organizational structures became possible."

   "The in-between spaces, where enlightening ideas surface."

4. **Cultural Exchange and Diversity:** Cultural encounters within the collaborative setting are appreciated, offering insights into diverse educational perspectives and fostering an understanding of differences.

   "We don't just experience differences; we reflect on them together."

   "I had so many assumptions about our cultural contexts that were inaccurate."

5. **Increase in Criticality:** More able to critique own and others' practice with higher researcher agency.

   "I have been surprised at how valuable it is to set aside one's own habitus in favour of an explorative intellectual discourse and a shared passionate interest."

Discussion

Our accounts of our time together reflect the different yet complementary ways each of us makes sense of our practice (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2022). The themes point to our curiosity and motivation to learn, which can result in altered ways of thinking or perceiving reality (Kiley, 2009). The collaboration enabled us to crucially examine our change together. Such liminality involves wavering between two worlds after the separation from the previous identity but before the point of incorporation into a new one (Keefer, 2015).

As we spent time together face-to-face, we began further examining the liminal space between each of our newly discovered contexts, cultures and practices. As trust built among us, we shared increasingly freely about our responses to each other and our practices. We increasingly had critical conversations that would not be had in our own institutions. The subsequent increase in criticality enabled us to see ourselves and our practice in new ways, amplified by the rare, honest critique of our collaborators. This is not the case in collaborations within our institutions, where all collaborators noted the risk in such critique.

Researchers observed that cultural exchange and diversity altered their perspectives, with value noted to set aside one's usual habitus in favour of a practice, which is both an intellectual discourse and an emotional experience. This generated curiosity, which has fuelled the collaboration. We examined rigidity and polarity in our educational contexts. For example, ethical permission to publish the findings of this work required a significant ethical process in NZ, yet not so in Denmark. In another example the idea of learner agency is implemented widely differently across the contexts. In Canada, it meant having a choice of paper to take, and in NZ, it meant the learner co-constructing the curriculum. This highlighted the cultural positions around learning and the learning facilitator in different countries. From these and other examples, it became increasingly clear that a new criticality required a liminal space to be enabled. A study with teachers by Sannino (2010) has indicated how resistant and disruptive discourses and activities can be modified, becoming constructive and (positively) agentive within the group. In the liminal space we created, we were able to engage in dialogue where we shared disruptive concepts more freely and constructively than we were able to do at our own institutions.

We discussed how stretching ourselves to meet each other and share has created an opportunity for each of us to go deeper into our learning together. Firstly, there was a clear need to get over our own misconceptions and assumptions about each other's contexts. Easley & Kleinberg (2010) suggested that within networks, there are structural and interpersonal dimensions to connection, with weak ties being the key to bypassing strong nodes. Our network has occurred because each party in our shared learning system is able to behave more like allies by stretching towards novelty through new connections as we let go of our assumptions of the other.

This sense of heightened researcher agency is different from our usual practices as researchers. We gained more than we expected in areas we did not expect.

Researchers shared more about their personal lives than expected. During our visit, we met family members and planned future conferences together in hopes of including other colleagues and family members. Two of the authors completing doctoral studies commented on the special value of collaboration for the sensemaking of their chosen research. In a study of doctoral learners, Atkinson et al. (2022) pointed to a need to enhance spaces of agency in the graduate research experience to reflect the multidimensionality of students' lives.

The collaboration was carried out in English, which is a second language for the Danes present.

In a study examining international collaboration in higher education research, Avdeev (2021) concluded language is not a significant factor in the formation of collaboration for North American and Asian researchers. Our experience was of the delight to share and learn a new language that had special meaning, such as Dannelse (becoming/formation) in Danish, or the Mana (prestige, authority) of learners in NZ Māori, or the significance and meaning of innovation in the Canadian context.

As the collaborators have been carrying out research together, the differences in our approach have often been unveiled unexpectedly. For example, we are studying the experience of learner agency across our institutions using the same approach of a semi-structured interview with common questions. Gaining ethical consent for this research to proceed from our institutions was very different in each of our contexts, and this alone has raised a rich dialogue about examining our own agency as researchers.

All researchers noted the therapeutic value of collaboration as a recurring theme. The notion of therapeutic benefits aligns with Richardson's (2006) perspective on the inherent value of doing what one loves being therapeutic. We have experienced a collective agency in this professional community as we exert influence, make choices, and take stances in ways that affect our work and professional identities (Hökkä et al. 2017). All researcher authors have been surprised by the value of the collaboration. Our

collective agency was transformed from a marginalized feeling of invisibility (Hökkä et al., 2017) to a sense of increased motivation and belonging to a research programme that is validated by our institutions and consequently less on the margins. We found what Vähäsantanen (2015) calls the importance of agency in our practice for our organizational commitment, satisfaction, well-being and professional identity.

Going forward, we plan to carefully involve a wider group of researchers to capture a broader range of experiences and perspectives for each country. We will keep having our monthly online meetings and are looking forward to meeting face-to-face again in mid-2025. Before that, we will keep researching learner agency and involve more colleagues through a speaker series.

Summary

The collaborative research highlights the transformative potential of liminal spaces in learning, where researchers critically examine their practices and undergo significant shifts in perception. Grocott (2022) emphasizes the necessity of an embodied, cognitive, and social experience for transformative learning. Liminality, described by Thomassen (2016), facilitates transitions between identities, fostering critical reflection and action (Mezirow, 2000). The researchers found that trust and cultural exchange in their collaboration allowed for more honest and constructive critiques, enhancing their understanding and practice. This dynamic created a heightened sense of agency, differing from typical institutional collaborations, and underscored the value of reflexive, critical engagement in educational research.

We have gained more than we bargained for, by discovering how this investigation and collaboration enriched us, which implies that we can do something similar for learners in a relationship of reciprocal learning. We have learnt more about our own agency than expected—this is the unveiling of the unforeseen—that every researcher is a learner, and every learner is a researcher.

Note on Contributors

Steve Henry works for Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand, supporting learners to gain degrees based on learning from their experience. His current doctorate focus is exploring transformational learning in vocational learning in Aotearoa/New Zealand. His research interests include response to disruption and learner agency.

Emma Smith, PhD is the Associate Dean of Research and Development at Humber Polytechnic where she collaborates in the creation of diverse and accessible research opportunities for faculty, staff, and students. Emma has previously lectured in the fields of research design and methodologies, gender studies, sociology, criminology, and professional development at the undergraduate level. She is currently a Co-Investigator on a multi-method evaluation of the Toronto Police Service's Neighbourhood Community Officer Program.

Ginger Grant is an Innovation Researcher, Academic Entrepreneur and Activist. Ginger's passion is innovation management—the design, development and implementation of innovation strategies that transform corporate culture, drive engagement and high performance teams for competitive advantage. She has held senior leadership positions and consulted in a variety of fields including engineering, telecommunications, education, transportation, government, law, software development, gaming and the creative industries.

Jan Hendrik Roodt (linkedin.com/in/drjanroodt) is a transdisciplinarian working in strategic management and systems modelling in industry in New Zealand and Finland, and an advanced learning facilitator for postgraduate students in professional practice and innovation at Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand. He is a member of the IEEE Systems Council, International Council on Systems Engineering, and IT Professionals New Zealand.

Lisa Anketell is the Senior Research Specialist with Research and Innovation at Humber Polytechnic. Lisa's research focus is on quality assurance and program innovation in college, polytechnic, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutes. Lisa holds a M.Ed. in Adult Education and Community Development with a collaborative program in Comparative, International and Development Education, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Higher Education.

Niels Bjerre Tange is head of the research programme for knowledge and values in professional practice and lecturer at the department of teacher education at VIA University College

in Denmark. He holds a PhD in general pedagogy, a Master's degree in philosophy and has a background as a teacher and headmaster in the Danish public school. His research focuses on theoretical and empirical research in the practice and values in school and education.

Thomas Iskov is Head of Research, Centre for the Study of Professions at VIA University College, Denmark. His research interests include quality and teaching in higher education, professional development and student-centred learning. He holds a PhD in general pedagogy and has a background in teacher education. (https://www.ucviden.dk/en/persons/thomas-iskov; https://www.linkedin.com/in/thomas-iskov)

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