

*The Development of Professional Identity in a Learning Community of  
Adult Students*

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**Abstract**

This article is part of a larger research-based development process that focuses on a question “How to Use Learning Communities in Higher Education”. The target group is a group of adult students of social services at a University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The student group is very heterogeneous. The adult students coming to study have very differing educational backgrounds. Some of them have already completed their Master’s studies in some different subject and some students have taken lower-level vocational studies in social services. Some of these students have a lot of experience from the social field and some other students have none. These differences between the students can have an effect on the development of a student’s (professional) identity. The focus in this article is on students’ experiences: how do the students feel that they belong to their learning communities and what kind of aspects can they recognize enhancing or hindering their sense of belonging to their student group. This article presents the very first findings of the development process that will continue the next few years. This is not research but some research methods are used to bring out the voice of the participants.

Keywords: Professional Identity, Higher Education, Learning Community,  
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## **Introduction**

There are many aspects to consider when constructing a professional identity as a student of social services. After graduating as a Bachelor of Social Services, our students can work with various client groups. Students can also acquire competence in working as an early childhood educator. All these possibilities can make it complicated for the students to construct their own professional identity. There is also another aspect that makes the development of professional identity even more challenging. In Finland, we have a dual model in higher education; science universities and universities of applied sciences. In some professions, as in early childhood educator's, there is a continuous discussion about and comparison between the different qualifications, and the differences between those who have graduated from science universities and those who have graduated from universities of applied sciences, and these differences should be made clearer at work. This same phenomenon between the two competing qualifications sometimes arises in multi-professional work as well. Some students of social services can complete their practical training in health care organizations and in these working environments, they need to recognize the differences between the orientations of health care and social services professionals. This all means that it is very important for our students to have a strong professional identity so that they recognize and can use their own competences and capabilities in multi-professional cooperation.

Trede, Maclin and Bridges (2012) classify three aspects of professional identity that are based on Lawler's (2008) definition of 'identity'. The first aspect refers to the ways one becomes similar or identical to the others at the same work or in the same profession. According to the second, each person also becomes different from those who are not part of one's profession. In the third, one identifies him or herself as a member of his or her professional group. (Trede et al. 2012, 379-380.) If we compare this definition with the diversity of educations and professions described in the previous chapter, we can see how complicated it can be for the students of social services to construct their professional identity.

Trede et al. (2012) suggest that nowadays, professional identity development is not only about being in the world, but it must also be about being in a multiplicity of worlds or communities, and professional identity and its development is, thus, complex. In this article, I concentrate on one group of adult students and the way these students reflect their sense of affinity with their own study group and learning communities. At the end of this article, these findings are reflected compared with the larger picture of professional identity and professional communities.

### **The beginning of the research-oriented development process**

The data described in this article is part of a larger research-oriented development process. The process started when we had the first big cohort of adult students beginning their studies in the beginning of year 2016. It is a global trend to have bigger student groups and fewer teachers. Our solution for this new situation was to divide the students in six learning communities, with ten students in each. There are plenty of studies showing that learning communities can foster learning in higher education (e.g. Anderson & McCune 2013; Hill & Haigh 2012). Trede et al. (2012) have reviewed higher education literature on the development of professional

identities. The authors conclude that amongst all articles they reviewed there is a shared understanding that collaborative and dialogic learning enables and facilitates professional identity development. They also suggest that the focus has mostly been on individuals and not on frames. The authors suggest that more attention should be given to observing how university teaching and learning facilitate the development of professional identity. (Trede et al. 2012, 378.) During our development process, we discovered that learning communities were important for the students in the beginning of their studies also because they gave an opportunity to get peer support for many different aspects. Some students were more capable of using virtual learning environments and some students were familiar with writing reports. One student even mentioned how peer support helped her to settle in Eastern Finland and in a new city. Many students told us how important it was for them to get both cognitive and emotional support from their peers in the beginning of their studies. These experiences are also important for the construction of identity; do I feel that I belong to this new group of students?

In our degree programme, we tend to interview all our students after the first study year and ask about their experiences of studies. This time we also asked about the students' experiences of their learning communities. After interviewing the total of 60 students, we found out that there were several types of good experiences of learning communities. However, there were also experiences that worried us. It is not surprising that group work does not always work in an ideal way, but experiences of a peer group hindering the learning is something that needs to be reflected more precisely by us teachers. After the interviews, we gathered together all student comments from learning communities and then, with the students' permissions, made thematic analysis for this data. Finally, the findings were presented to the students. I also wanted to have some more data on the subject and I asked the students to write a short essay with the theme "My experiences of belonging or not-belonging to a group". The students were free to define the concept of 'group'. Most students only reflected on their sense of affinity in their learning community, but some students also reflected on their belongingness within a larger student group:

"I feel I'm in the right field, I feel I belong to the group."

"Previously I have ended my studies because I felt that I did not belong to that study group."

"Sometimes I wonder whether I belong to the group as the others have more experience."

In their writings, many students referred to the diversity of the group. The diversity works as a mirror the students compare themselves to. As background information for the study, I asked the students whether they feel having none, a little, or a lot of experience in working in the field of social services, and these answers gave some more perspective for the other data. Amongst the answers, there were examples of both students who did not have any work experience and students who had a lot of experience in the social sector, and both experienced that it is important to see the others as a mirror for their own competence. However, the diversity did not always promote group work:

"I experienced that I did not become heard by other group members, because I did not have previous experience of social welfare work."

“I have thought that as we have different educational backgrounds in the group, do we respect each other.”

“I did not have the sense of affinity within the group in which all the other members were much younger than me.”

“A different life situation effects on how you experience your sense of affinity within the group.”

In the previous quotes, the students reflect on the diversity in form of differences in educational background, work experience, age, and life situation. Anderson and McCune (2013) present that one important issue is to reflect the power relations in the community: “Whose voices are heard and how mutual respect and equity of treatment can be fostered?” This is an especially important question in very heterogeneous groups. Our data also shows that some students were pondering these questions of power, although they did not use that exact word. According to the students’ descriptions of a good group, a good group makes you feel equal, accepts dissimilarities, allows a free atmosphere, and can also reflect its own group processes. If we want to support the development of (professional) identity, it is important that the group allows the participants to develop their agency. Anderson and McCune (2013, 285) suggest that another aspect of power, which is essential in university learning communities, involves students’ agency. In our data, the students also refer to the differences in agency as a learner:

“I don’t have the sense of belonging to the group. I have a different motivation than the others. I want to do the assignments as well as possible.”

“Because I belong to many groups, I sometimes feel being an outsider, but I think this is also an advantage.”

Some adult students are completing their studies faster if they have accredited some of their studies with their previous studies. In the last quote, a student feels it is also an advantage to belong to many groups. Anderson and McCune (2013, 290) suggest that there might be less teaching challenges if the students and teachers are working in the same community for a long time. Instead, Hughes (2007) suggests that “the risky experience of discomfort and conflict might be more of a learning experience than harmonious interaction”. Some of our students wrote that they have managed to complete the assignment successfully in spite of the problems in their group. They also wrote that this experience has taught them that they can also work in difficult teams. This is a very important discovery from the perspective of professional identity. Also, there were a few students who mentioned that being in the same group for a long time does not challenge them and that there is a danger to stay in the same role in all the assignments. These findings point it out how important it is to try to find a balance for the time the group works together and the changes made in one group.

## **Conclusions**

The examples presented in this article have been obtained from a student group after their first study year. At this point, I would like to ask you, as a reader, to ponder if the quotes presented in this paper could also be examples from the world of work? I think they could. There are the same kind of aspects that both students and employees could reflect on their identity and the sense of affinity within a group. This makes me

think how important it is to recognize these phenomena during the study years and try to handle them so that the students can learn about these experiences, have a stronger identity and, perhaps, learn to handle some negative team work situations in their future jobs. The next question is; how could we enhance a student's stronger feeling of belonging to a group in higher education? Trede et al. (2012, 380) suggest that it is not enough to teach knowledge, skills, values and ways of being, but also to focus on building a student's sense of affinity in a professional community. It is also one strategic aim for universities of applied sciences that we create professional communities and learning communities where students, teachers and professionals can all participate and learn together.

There has also been debate about discipline versus generic professional identity development. Trede et al. (2012) argue that universities need to prepare graduates for global citizenship, leadership qualities and future practices. The authors remind that many people change their profession and there is the need for generic professional identity development formation. This claim is highly relevant for those social welfare students who also obtain the competence to work as early childhood educators. After their graduation, these students can choose not only the client group they work with, but whether to work in the field of social welfare or early childhood education. This paper has presented only a few and very first findings of a development process that will continue for the next few years. I am happy to welcome all comments and ideas that could help us to continue our development process.

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