

Reflecting on the Journey Towards Identity and Belonging During Professional Doctoral Study

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ABSTRACT

The Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) is a doctoral level professional qualification for practising teachers that affords the opportunity to research an area of practice of particular interest. Many EdD students encounter mixed feelings, emotions and new identities as many could be leaders within their employment and seen as 'experts' in their role, however, they may find themselves on the periphery of a new community of which they are yet to feel a part. This reflective paper explores the role of 'identity' and 'belonging' in Professional Doctoral students with particular emphasis placed on situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the notion of communities of practice. I discuss the idea of 'identity congruence' and how I experienced this in terms of my identity as a leader of learning and as a fledgling doctoral researcher. The paper concludes that communities of practice promote a sense of community and belonging that have clearly supported me through the doctoral journey.

KEYWORDS

identity, belonging, community of practice, identity congruence

INTRODUCTION

The Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) is a significant undertaking, particularly if an individual is also working in a full-time capacity whilst studying part-time. The aim of this article is to provide a reflection of both the taught (coursework) and research phases of the Professional Doctorate in Education and how my identity was (re)shaped in terms of my position as an educator and as a doctoral researcher. Emphasis will be placed on the idea of 'identity congruence' (Hughes, 2010, p.47) and how my researcher identity developed from engagement with communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000).

THE TAUGHT PHASE: FROM LEADER TO LEARNER

The thought of becoming a doctoral researcher in a Professional Doctorate programme was daunting as I was fulfilling a full-time teaching position in a secondary school, and I was also an Associate School Leader with responsibility for literacy across the school curriculum. These multiple roles presented me with new experiences, both positive and negative, and changes in identity that I was to negotiate in order to become part of a research community at the university and a new member of the extended leadership team at school. For me, this was to involve a shift in identity – in school, I was a senior leader with extensive experience in teaching and learning – in the research environment, I saw myself as being a novice on the periphery (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of this community as

I was not yet an experienced doctoral researcher. For me to achieve my goal of earning a doctorate, it was necessary for me to address this shift in collective identity (Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx, 2011) and for me to do this, participation and immersion in the research culture were key to my eventual success. 'Collective Identity' is defined by Vignoles et al. (2011, p. 3) as 'people's identification with the groups and social categories to which they belong'. There is a notion in identity research (Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005) that an individual may not possess a single, unitary identity but multiple identities that are integrated and are seen as separate components of one identity. Participation in the research culture at the university was the first steps to identifying with a specific group of people, researchers. Teeuwssen et al. (2014) suggested 'from a situated perspective, participation is a way of knowing' (p.683) which aligns closely with my epistemological view of knowledge being shared and socially constructed. Lave and Wenger (1991) called this 'legitimate peripheral participation' which describes the action of participating and interacting with experienced members of a community of practice to learn from their expertise.

'Identity congruence' is the coming together of aspects of identity formation; social, operational and knowledge-related identity (Hughes, 2010, p.50). The notion of identity congruence aligns with Rattansi and Phoenix (2005) who posited that an individual may possess multiple components of a single identity. As a doctoral researcher, a key goal was to improve my engagement in the learning that was taking place in my Professional Doctorate courses, however, this was hampered by my existing teaching commitments and doubts I had with the quality of my academic writing. Students' preparedness to negotiate identity congruence could differ as a



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result of external factors such as employment and family pressures and this can affect the level of participation and engagement in learning. Watts (2008) described this as a 'fractured student identity' where an individual exists in a variety of circumstances and has multiple responsibilities. They also may have psychological difficulty in switching from one mind-set to another: in my case, caregiver for my elderly mum, doctoral researcher and school middle leader. According to Bhabha (1994), identity is not finite and there is no real end point; identities change according to the circumstances in which an individual finds themselves and these adapt and change over time. Vignoles et al. (2011, p. 6) suggested that individuals may have 'multiple group identities that may shift in salience depending on features of the intergroup context'.

Hughes (2010) used the term 'belonging' (p.48) which is a term that I believe is pertinent to how I felt at that time. Students who have a low sense of belonging to a learning group and are not able to make 'identity shifts' (p.48) may tend to underperform or possibly leave the programme due to an inability to integrate new experiences into their identity. The fact that I was part of a cohort of doctoral students made this notion of 'belonging' a little easier to negotiate as we were all in the same situation and were a close-knit community with a common goal of obtaining a doctoral degree.

As a 'newcomer' to the doctoral research community, I felt that I benefited greatly from interacting with other doctoral peers in my cohort as well as having the forum to discuss and share ideas with people from various academic backgrounds. I was in a cohort that consisted of individuals who were at the same point of their career and were in positions of leadership in their respective professions. It was helpful to me knowing that my colleagues in the cohort were undergoing the same experiences – being an experienced leader as well as entering doctoral study as a novice. We were able to share our thoughts on integrating new experiences into our identities on our journey to becoming a Doctor of Education and an academic expert in our respective fields.

THE THESIS PHASE: FROM LEARNER TO RESEARCHER

As the taught phase of the Professional Doctorate came to an end, it became strikingly evident how my initial thesis idea and positioning had changed through further engagement with taught modules and with communities of practice. This section will illustrate how engagement with the wider research community of practice supported me through the process of finalising my research idea before embarking on the thesis phase of the programme.

In order to capture the thoughts and experiences of the taught phase, I created a haiku which is a Japanese poem made up of three lines following a specific pattern of syllables. The haiku served as a mantra for me which I followed throughout the remainder of the EdD programme.

'The fog is lifting,
perseverance, stick at it,
engagement is key.'

This haiku captures how I felt at the end of the taught phase in terms of a clearing of thoughts and that my thesis proposal was taking shape. Perseverance was necessary as there were indeed times when certain stages of the research process were taking

longer than planned or finding a particular paper or concept challenging to understand. As discussed in the previous section, in order to maintain a sense of belonging and to continue learning from experienced researchers and other peers in my cohort, engagement was key in ensuring that I continued my inward trajectory to becoming an experienced member of the doctoral community of practice.

The second year of the Professional Doctorate programme, for me, served as a period of reflection to refine ideas and try out potential research methods in preparation for the thesis stage. At the start of the year, I was still unclear as to the direction in which my research would take me. Faced with conducting a literature review on a broad topic of motivation and language education, I thought it necessary to seek guidance from established scholars in the field of motivation theory and foreign language education, keeping in line with the haiku that 'engagement is key'.

The Professional Doctorate has presented to me a number of opportunities to engage with communities of practice made up of individuals from different disciplines and with differing degrees of expertise. An example of this was being given the opportunity to present my research idea to a group of doctoral students from across the faculty at a Doctoral Presentation Event in January 2017. The audience comprised of doctoral supervisors and fellow doctoral students (PhD and Professional Doctorates) from disciplines such as education, medical education and educational psychology. The participants were at different stages of their programme of study and I was made aware that I was the first Professional Doctorate student to present at such an early stage of the programme. I was apprehensive at first as my research idea was still developing and my pilot study was in a fledgling state. It was from discussion with other students in my cohort and my Academic Advisor that I was encouraged to present as it would give me the opportunity to obtain some valuable feedback on my research idea and my proposed methodology. This was indeed the case with some excellent constructive feedback being offered on the direction of my pilot study and my proposed methodology.

For the purpose of the pilot study, I had designed a set of Likert scale statements for use in a questionnaire which would be given to parents of children in secondary education. Before creating the questionnaire, I approached an existing group of education professionals with whom I connect through a closed discussion forum on Facebook in order to gather feedback on my statements. The rationale for this was due to the audience having a vested interest in my proposed research as well as having real life experience of interacting with parents about their child's performance in modern foreign languages. Discussions are posted regularly on the decline of language learning in secondary and further education due to changes in education policy and how this is affected by the qualification reforms and the general motivation of students to learn a language. By approaching this group, I was able to acquire comments and feedback from all over the world from both male and female teachers, experienced teachers and newly qualified teachers (NQTs), primary, secondary, tertiary and higher education teachers and lecturers. The opportunity to gather thoughts and ideas from such a combined wealth of knowledge and understanding allowed me to refine my statements and make them more fit for purpose, knowing that I had received feedback from people for whom this research could be valuable in enhancing their own practice. This process was not only a phase that supported my research but was also key to the creation of an online community of practice.

According to Goodyear et al (2014), social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, facilitates working with multiple groups and overcomes time and financial implications. This was certainly the case in terms of using social media as the conduit for creating a community of practice since Facebook is now seen as a global phenomenon and is also 'positioned as an educative tool' (Goodyear et al, 2014; p.928). Using the closed group on Facebook for the purpose of the pilot study allowed me to post my research idea and the statements quickly and this was disseminated to thousands of individuals who could potentially comment on my work.

The evolution of the community of practice started with a simple post using social media where I asked members of a closed group to comment on my statements. I stated that any posts made would be anonymous and would be taken as permission for them to be used in the data collection exercise. As the comments were posted, it became clear that these members were as passionate about my research as I was. Being a linguist and a researcher, it was highlighted to me that my questionnaire statements were unintentionally biased which brought into question my positionality. There was a clear conflict of identity with my 'linguist self' influencing the language that I used. From doing this, I was more aware of how my position as a teacher and a linguist could influence my research and that this process has challenged me to become 'reflexively vigilant' (Le Gallais, 2008). My passion for languages and language teaching was clear throughout the statements as all of them were positively worded with no traces of negativity.

This feedback had clear implications for the construction of the questionnaire as the data collected would be biased and there would be an imbalance of positively and negatively worded statements. When constructing the statements, this was clearly not considered and the implications for my research could have been profound in terms of validity and credibility and if it was not for engaging with the language professionals, I would not have been aware of this until it was too late.

Whilst the use of social media facilitated circulating my pilot study information, there were a number of constraints that I had not considered beforehand. The timing of the pilot study fell during the Easter break due to a delay in receiving approval from the Ethics Committee. This meant that I had to rely on people checking Facebook posts during a holiday period when most educational professionals are away and do not answer work-related posts. It could have been the case that no-one commented on my proposed statements which would have had severe consequences on the outcome of my pilot study. I had to therefore rely on the goodwill of fellow language professionals to comment on my post. However, given the nature of my research and the number of posts that my discussion thread received, it was clear that my proposed research was of great interest to others and could potentially shed light on an issue that has impacted negatively on language learning for a number of years.

A further constraint was the reliability of internet connections and the social media network themselves. For example, should the website be unavailable due to technical faults or lack of internet connectivity, the gathering of information would not be possible, and I would have had no data for my pilot study. It was, therefore, necessary to ensure that the discussion thread was posted in a timely manner once having received ethical approval.

One further consideration is that of including other language professionals who choose not to use social media. Whilst I had

access to a wealth of information and experience through the online discussion forum, I had not considered other professionals who do not use Facebook but still could have offered some valuable feedback. I am a member of a network of teaching professionals in Birmingham, UK with whom I could have discussed my research without relying on Facebook. It would also have been a way of sharing my research with local teachers who could also be interested in motivation theory and foreign language learning. As highlighted by Goodyear et al (2014), social media such as Facebook and Twitter are good tools for frequent and extended communication with others but should be supported by other forms of communication, such as face-to-face dialogue, telephone conversations and email correspondence.

Developing a digital academic identity through engagement with social media has allowed me to share my ideas and my work with academics in Education and beyond as well as presenting me with opportunities to collaborate on projects and participate in events related to my research. It has also been pivotal in my work being validated by the research community which enhances my sense of belonging and identity as a researcher.

CONCLUSIONS

There is clear evidence to suggest that communities of practice play an important role in supporting individuals with achieving their learning goal. As the thesis process involved less contact with others, it was necessary for me to develop ways of maintaining contact with the CoPs of which I consider myself a member. This was through contact via social media, email, telephone and other forms of electronic communication. For me, the engagement with the online community of practice of language professionals highlighted a number of issues which I had not considered previously as well as offering other avenues of thought and inquiry and this will be a key learning point when going into the thesis stage. Studying for a research degree where there is little interaction with a cohort of students could be seen as lonely or isolating. The Professional Doctorate, however, promotes what Nistor et al (2015) called a 'sense of community' and this is defined as a sense of belonging and a feeling of intimacy with the community. Over the past five years, I have certainly felt a part of the EdD group having contributed my thoughts and opinions as well as receiving critique and feedback from others. A central idea of a CoP is that of 'shared emotional connection' (Nistor et al, 2015, p.262). Through shared emotional connections, there is a sense that the community becomes stronger; the more interactions there are, the closer members become. As the thesis stage requires fewer instances of face-to-face interactions with other students, I feel that the shared emotional connections that the cohort had during the first two years continued to fuel and sustain what has been a valuable support network for me. I also recognise the value of communities of practice within the workplace and as a result of my successful doctoral journey, I have supported practitioners in my own workplace by creating a 'Teaching and Learning Community of Practice', the remit of which is to share good practice across faculties as well as maintain rigorous quality assurance processes with the shared aim of delivering outstanding teaching to our students.



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