

Returning from Practice to Theory to Practice too

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Abstract

Contemporary aspirations of higher education emphasise various conceptions of employability and ready-to-work students. This is often included in education as authentic problems parting from prospective vocational practices or different types of apprenticeship, thus reciprocally enriching theoretical insights with practical actions for the becoming novice, student. Practice becomes a space entangled in specific pedagogical approaches and considerations. However, the opposite also happens, practice returning to education, where practitioners with years of vocational experience return.

This paper presents a case study of an educational Master's program consisting of both students continuing the education from a bachelor program, and practitioners returning to education. Based on Dewey's experiential continuum, we investigate how we by non-intrusive means can aid students' (N = 28) in reflecting on their past, present and anticipated future in relation to the educational program. The data consist of short, personal snapshots containing short personal characteristics, motivations, and career prospects written by the students on post-it notes (N = 311). The post-its were collected on the first day of study through a workshop.

The snapshots show a wide variation in students' rationales and ambitions, such as technical and generic competence development, modes of studying, aspirations to change career and profession, but also personal aspects such as family life. A common denominator is a shared story about ambitions to change current careers or open new avenues for employment and professional practice.

Keywords

Problem-based learning, ways of experience, experiential pedagogy

Introduction

Often universities are considered transitional or liminal spaces (Savin-Baden, 2016), where students through rites of passage and years of copious study finally emerges as professional practitioners. It is a space of cultural and social traditions and rules (Meehan & Howells, 2019). It is also a space and place of multiplicities: materials, experiences, people with different ‘stories-so-far’ (Massey, 2005).

In this paper, we want to draw attention to a space of interrelations of stories-so-far and individuals’ aspirations for their education. This is born out of a practical problem concerning students’ sense of belonging in an educational Master’s programme consisting of students with different educational backgrounds and professional experience, where both epistemic beliefs and professional identities are challenged. Practically, in our daily teaching and supervision, we see different types of knowledge being valorised while others are not. Drawing on Schön (1983), we find troubles in the intersection of educationally developed technical rationality and practical, professional doings, and for returning practitioners these troubles are often bound in epistemological (and perhaps ontological) breaks too: *“I was a [insert occupation], I do not want to be/do anymore, which is why I am here.”* For some students such breaks even nullify previous experiences that otherwise could have been beneficial scaffolding schemas for learning. According to Dewey (2013), habitual beliefs and expectations influence *what* is experienced, and such ways are set by social factors, by tradition and education (p. 39). Hence, students’ previous experiences are a pivotal factor in a space in constant flux, and while we plan means and ends of education, ways of experience are not isolated to the formal space of educational institutions, practicum, or the individual student alone, but rather a totality of the everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014). To this we might add a careful remark from Lefebvre (2014), who writes that reflection is not an undistorted mirrored picture, but a ‘movement’ prone to distortions based on everyday life, ideologies and epistemic beliefs. Addressing reflection and reflexivity as part of educational practices might then require us to extend the act of reflection to include what Dewey denotes as “*culture*” (Alexander, 1987) or Lefebvre (2014) “*a critique of the everyday life*” to see the student as

more than someone dedicated to studying, not only a person belonging primarily to the university, future profession – or metric (Biesta, 2010).

In institutions practicing modes of inquiry-based education, such as Aalborg University (AAU) where this case study was conducted, students spend a substantial part of their time doing projects, emphasising a high degree of participant-direction and self-directed learning (Boelt & Clausen, 2023). In such a place and space, this also result in experiences of invisible pedagogy (Bernstein, 1977), self-directed co-construction of curriculum and negotiated practice among peers, teachers, and supervisors (Boelt, 2023; Clausen, 2023). Developing educational activities as purposefully driven towards fostering competent and ready-to-work graduates are often framed as pedagogical interventions geared towards post-modern, evidence-based, measurable outputs (Biesta, 2010), leaving little ambivalence for the inherently uncontrollable risks of education (Biesta, 2016; Rosa, 2020): what works today might not work tomorrow. ‘Space is a product of interrelations,’ notes Massey (2005, p. 9) in the opening proposition, of a contemporaneous plurality always under construction.

Tensions and belonging

As already hinted, our paper takes its point of departure in tensions experienced with a heterogenic student cohort, some continuing their movements from bachelor to Master’s programme and others returning with years of professional experiences. Diverse cohorts are reduced to ‘students’ or learners, a vague nodal point devoid of individual characteristics and contexts (Zapp, 2019), where the movement through space and place is one from a to b, b being graduation (Gourlay, 2015; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). Gravett and Ajjawi (2022) remarks that increasing heterogeneity ought to influence our conception of student belonging that typically omits racial, gendered and classed perspectives. Belonging at universities is reduced a uniform experience exemplified by the arch-typical on-campus, full-time, participating student, emphasising belonging in relation to academic performance, retention and uniform conceptualisations of psychological safety (Meehan & Howells, 2019).

Gravett and Ajjawi (2022) suggest broadening the scope, introducing Massey’s (2005) stories-so-far, noting belonging is a nomadic and ongoing process. By fixating students’ process of becoming, a movement from student to graduate, we risk depriving students of their stories-so-

far and the experiences that influence the ways interactions are had and interpreted. Massey's (2005) notion thus highlights the importance of experience as a constituent part in the reciprocal creation of a relational space in constant change. In education, such changes can be caused by overcoming threshold concepts regarding knowledge and practice, and a subsequently transformed way of understanding disciplines, like cultural rites transforming the individual – there no going back (Savin-Baden, 2016), only continued being-in-the-world. Thus, belonging is not an event, but an ongoing process, a prolonged initiation or rites of passage into a discipline (Bernstein, 1977). The intertwined process of being, becoming and belonging is also highlighted by Meehan and Howells (2019), who find both curriculum, staff, peers, and environment play pivotal parts in a constituent whole. In this paper we draw inspiration from Meehan and Howells' conceptual framework based on three, broad question concerning being, becoming, and belonging: *Who am I, who will I become, and how will I fit in?* (Meehan & Howells, 2019, p. 1378).

Our initiating research question is: How do students describe themselves and their motivations for enrolling in a Master's degree programme, and in what ways may these descriptions and motivations influence their experiences of education?

Inspired by Dewey's (1978) experiential continuum, his aims and ends of activities (Dewey, 1997) and a peripheral positioning of the theoretical bricolage presented below, we conducted a small case study during the first day of study with new students enrolled at a Master's programme at AAU.

The theoretical bricolage: ways of experiencing stories-so-far

In this section we want to outline the ideas informing our method and analysis. While our small case study is an isolated moment at the beginning of a Master's programme, we draw on theories emphasising continuity, temporality, and growth. As we noted above, being and becoming are ongoing processes, emphasising a past in the present moment, while prospective futures emerge through open-ended interrelations of stories-so-far.

We draw on Massey (2005) and Dewey (1978, 1997) and their perspectives on continued experience where the future is open and an out-

growth of present actions and interactions, while informed by experiences that are educative (Dewey, 2015, p. 37):

He has rendered himself more sensitive and responsive to certain conditions, and relatively immune to those things about him that would have been stimuli if he had made another choice.

Massey's 'stories-so-far' are intended to capture change occurring in phenomena from a temporal perspective. Such phenomenon can be a living thing, scientific attitude, a collective and more. More precisely 'story' is the history, change, movement of things themselves (Massey, 2005, p. 12). Different trajectories of stories exist simultaneously, interacting always in openness – there is no a priori fixed space. But there is a 'here' where spatial stories form conjugations of intertwined histories (Massey, 2005, p. 139), i.e. some shared historical process that in our case leads students to a particular education.

According to Dewey (2008), aims emerge as outgrowths of existing conditions as part of the continuity of human activity. We draw on the experiential continuum to emphasise the presence of a past and future in the present, where experience is not primarily *antedate*, but immediate and mediated pointing forward enabling growth (Alexander, 1987).

Dewey writes in *Experience and Nature* (2013) experience 'is of as well in nature.' We do not experience *experience*, but things interacting in certain ways. However, experience is often reduced to the act of experiencing something, but the object of experience is more than the given and includes "*a surrounding cluster of other qualities revived imaginatively as "ideas"*" (Dewey, 2013, p. 43). Particularly the former, the immediacy of how, is also noted by Dewey, who in his later works would jettison the word *experience* and replace it with 'culture' (Alexander, 1987, p. 70). Much like the inter-relational ontology of space outlined by Massey (2005), Dewey's 'culture' includes artifacts, activities, customs, beliefs, dispositions, morals, arts, knowledge and world-views: the shared life of human beings '*experienced in an indefinite variety of ways*' (LW1, p. 362, in Alexander, 1987, p. 71). Hence, to Dewey, experience is substantially more than empiricist direct accounts of reality and involve a wide variety of elements all contributing to a whole:

that the present moment of experience is a dynamic orientation to a whole process; it is an attempt to organize that process into a unity (Alexander, 1987, p. 76).

It is worthwhile to distinguish ‘experiencing’ from an experience. We experience some-thing(s) all the time, but some experiences stand out because of specific qualities that separate them from others, making them singular units for consummation. However, such experiences are also part of a continuity of interactions, aims and ends in view for later experiences, making them ‘problematic’ (Dewey, 2008).

Research context and methodological considerations

Our research takes place at AAU where a systemic integration of problem-oriented and problem-based learning is implemented (Feilberg et al., 2023). Much like other institutions that adopt an institutionalised pedagogy, several local interpretations of general learning principles exist (see for instance Feilberg et al., 2023 depiction of different interpretations of PBL at AAU). Such general principles are malleable, while also undergoing continued revision, and the latest iteration at AAU is supplemented by additional text addressing principles for digitally supported PBL scaffolding competences needed ‘in a modern world.’¹ The core tenets of AAU PBL model is that the problem is the starting point for learning; project organisation defines the temporal aspect and activities; courses support project work; cooperation; exemplary learning; students have a high degree of autonomy and responsibility for their learning (Boelt & Clausen, 2023). Typically, students spend half their time (roughly 15 ECTS) on project work, culminating in the final capstone project of 30 ECTS.

Methodological considerations

Our small case study involves students starting on the Master’s programme where we do our teaching and supervision and took place the first introductory day of study. The student cohort is diverse regarding both professional and personal experience and in phases of life. Some students continue directly from their bachelor program whereas others return after several years of employment and with other commitments such as family. In the cohort starting in 2024 there was 39 admissions with 15 different educational backgrounds and wide variety in professional and academic experience.

1 More information available here <https://www.en.aau.dk/about-aau/profile/pbl>

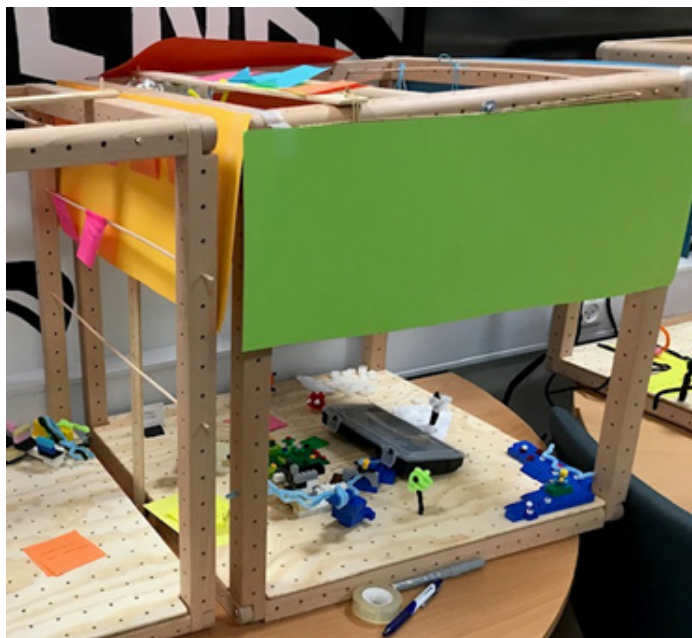
To make students aware of their experiences and traits that might influence ways of experiencing, we conducted a small workshop and asked students to produce short statements relating to three broad questions:

1. Who am I?
2. Why am I here?
3. How will I contribute to project work, and what do I expect from peers and myself in such contexts?

To initiate the dialogue each group would start of by piecing together a Tinker Cube, which is square with no walls. Figure 1 shows a Tinker Cube used in a different project. Once statements were written, post-it notes could be placed anywhere on or in the square for further discussion and categorisation. For each of three clusters of question, who, why and how, the groups had 5 minutes to individually write statements, 5 minutes to present them to peers, and 10 minutes to arrive at the shared synthesis.

The workshop served two purposes, one being primarily social, making the students talk and socialise before the semester starts in earnest, and second to make the students conscious of each other's phases in life and academic aspirations. As Dewey (1997) notes, any group of people can get together, but forming a sense of community requires dialog to establish a shared direction. The three questions were the initial framing of their dialogues, and to maintain an informal and open dialogue among people who might have met for the first time, we decided to collect short statements concerning each question on post-it notes.

Figure 1: Tinker Cube used in a previous semester project



Each post-it were collected and included in a descriptive coding process (Saldaña, 2009) to categorise the statements into similar themes. The initial coding resulted in 34 constructed themes that were aggregated and combined in a second iteration of refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2006) presented in the next section.

Though we write students ‘reflect,’ what really counts as a ‘useful’ reflective statement? Keogh, Boud and Walker (1985) suggest that reflection is returning to a situation and observing it anew. While we would like to think that the students return to a situation, the small statements concerning ambitions, insights into parenthood, educational background and so on hardly qualifies as a returning-to-a-situation, but ‘just’ an act of individual positioning, primarily serving as a mean to become aware of one’s situation compared to other’s.

Limitations

We concur that other means of data collection such as in-depth qualitative interviews either individually or in groups will provide richer answers (see Clark et al., 2016), but our curiosity as to whether such

short statements on post-it notes might even tell us something about the students got the best of us, and could start a process of becoming more attuned to our students' being and becoming.

For instance, it would be valuable to know how the interrelation of studying and parenthood might influence each other, and also how such perspectives might affect the interaction among peers with different perquisites for participation in the educational program. This will require a different research design including a temporal aspect sensitive towards the personal and everyday life.

The broad questions asked are culprits, too. A more focused workshop centred on a specific topic concerning educational experience might be of more direct and applicable value – i.e. what type of educational experience has been educative to you. However, we find the broad and open-ended approach serve as a qualifier for future research into experiences potentially fostering students' sense of belonging.

Findings

The descriptive coding process led to construction of 10 themes embedded in *who*, *why* and *how*. Table 1 summarises constructed themes and parent categories. Our aim is to note statements for each theme to gain a richer picture of the students, who they are, their motivation for studying, and what they expect of their peers. We will supply additional reflections from our daily interactions with students to address and expand some of the points presented in the following section.

Table 1: Themes for who, why and how

Who are they?	Personal life; educational background; vocational experience;
Why are they here?	Prospective career; personal development;
Contributions to teamwork	Expectations to peers; personal characteristics; study competences;

Who are they?

‘Who the students are’ is mostly based on short statements related to aspects of their personal life, relationships, family and where they live. As already hinted, the students are different phases of life, and most students use family relations to describe themselves. Some students are parents, others are brothers or sisters, some are single without kids:

“Three kids, 2, 8, 9 years old,” “No kids,” “Aunt to 5.”

Using relationships to describe themselves entails an ‘enlisting’ of others to describe certain ways of being and might also point to factors affecting future participation in education (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). It is interesting to note, that some students who do not state parenthood instead writes ‘aunt’, ‘uncle’ or ‘pet owner’ as relations, suggesting some efforts towards a sense of alignment in values found in relationships among students.

Several students position themselves by their educational background and previous employment. The variation in educational background is not surprising and confirm what is already known, representing both university BAs and PBA, the latter predominantly by public school teachers. Vocational experience is quite divergent, ranging from relevant parttime study job to fulltime employment. One student’s statement informs us of 15 years in professional practice whereas other peers note 3–4 years as practicing teachers in public schools:

“Teacher, educated in 2021,” “Nurse,” “Software developer,” “Teacher for 11 years; math; physics; history”

It is fair to assume that being in different phases of life will influence the individual student’s trajectory through education. Gravett and Ajjawi (2022) and Gourlay (2015) emphasise how participation in education is becoming less homogeneous as student populace is increasingly heterogenic, and individual priorities subsequently changes.

Why are they here

The previous section showed how relationships, educational background and employment are used to delineate each individual student, a construction of subject-ness (Biesta, 2016). Such statements provided little

information to us as teachers and researchers but can be valuable information to other students in relation to alignment of expectations for future personal engagement.

Why students choose the educational programme is on the other hand more explicitly articulated by students. Students' statements show two themes as to why they are here: One related to potential careers and one of personal development.

Several students state that the Master's programme with its ICT focus will provide new opportunities for their career trajectories. Some students state "cand.it = job opportunities", "IT is the future" and the majority state job-security as a reason why. 'ICT' and technological development is central element of the shared spatial stories of society, and so are descriptions of precarious and volatile job market. Such shared stories fused in students' statements which at the core revolves around achieving some sense of security. The 'surrounding cluster' of culture might then influence ways of experiencing, as Dewey noted (Alexander, 1987).

Other students emphasise ambitions to change an existing career:

"Changing career; no more care work; every door is open," "Change of industry," to "No longer be a teacher (identity crisis)," and "No longer be a physiotherapist."

Hence, education is to some a means enabling vocational mobility. Why students wish to alter existing career paths other than identity crisis only few hints are found. One student note that the societal attitudes towards health care workers are tiresome, while another remark that the existing education and employment were only temporary steppingstones. For the former, Dewey's 'culture' point to the mesh of an interacting and 'shared life,' influencing the ways individual experiences are had (Alexander, 1987).

Most of the students' statement regarding why they are here also revolves around what kind of job they want, and a common thread are ambitions to work with project management and leadership. Furthermore, improvement in work-life balance is stated by some students, hoping a different job will provide 'normal' working hours and higher salary.

Few statements address what seems coupled with inclination towards improving existing conditions for a specific group of practitioners:

“Want to develop/implement ICT solution in health care,” “Improve conditions in public schooling,” and “Change typical workflows in pedagogical jobs.”

What ICT solutions and conditions need improvement is not stated, but it is pointing to a perceived value and authority of education and knowledge, and the aspirations to change practices.

Student statements also show other perspectives than those related to future careers and includes attitudes towards personal development that is not explicitly linked to careers, although such perspectives may figure in the background. Some students simply state:

“Academic challenge,” “Academic and personal challenges,” and “I like a challenge.”

Some students’ statements concern timing, and only few addresses learning subject matter of the educational program as a motivational factor, but in relation to an employability perspective it appears that students overwhelmingly expect a degree to open new avenues both personally but mostly professionally.

Contributions to teamwork

The majority of students statements concerning expectations to peers centre on developing alignment, equality in level of contributions, mutual trust and respect, and creating a sense of wellbeing. Previous research has also confirmed such considerations as central components for students working in PBL environments (Boelt, 2023). Describing themselves as members of a team, most use positive adjectives such as:

“Creative,” “Flexible,” “Honest,” “Empathetic,” and “Systematic,”

This is perhaps not surprising given the students met each other only hours prior, and we expect few would characterise themselves as a typical social loafer. One student state that the person is an ‘overthinker,’ which by some could be interpreted as a subject potentially impeding a project’s progress.

Few students have noted how they contribute to teamwork with relevant abilities. Those who have, highlight project planing and structuring the written report. One student state:

“Strong ‘on’ the writing-parts and grammar + overview and connections.

What the “writing-parts” signify we do not know. It may be related to the totality, structure or perhaps even personal pleasure found in writing.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Our aim was to research how students describe themselves and their motivations for enrolling and how such descriptions and motivations may influence students’ ways of experience education. In terms of how they describe themselves in relation to family, educational background we find the variation we expected based on prior experience and information given upon enrolment. This reaffirms the picture of a heterogeneous student cohort constituted by individuals in different phases of life (Graveet & Ajjawi, 2022). Parenthood, for instance, is a shared story-so-far among some students, whereas it for others may be a story-yet-to-come, and one we have seen affecting priorities and ways students experience the educational program. However, how students work towards their goals and how everyday life affect studying is outside the scope of this small case study and require detailed research

The post-it notes provide a broad and general overview of students’ being, who they are, and their ambitions for their education. As to how students will fare in relation to lifelong learning only hints are given: Students return from practice to education to change careers, essentially highlighting education as a valuable vehicle to open new vistas. In such a perspective, lifelong learning is not only societal or capitalist aspirations but an existential trait resulting in a change person (see Jarvis, 2007).

The differences in profession and educational background also influence ways of experiencing, particularly we find a perceived schism between students holding a PBAs and BA. Schön’s (1985) technical rationality is a fitting depiction, where representatives from practice and theory meet in a shared space, but there is no continuum between practice and theory, it is the prioritised application of the latter to the former.

The stories do not become entangled. The stories, however, converge in students' statements as to why they are here. Most of the students imagine the Master's programme to open new avenues for professional and career perspectives. As some students noted, maybe ICT *is* in everything, especially in our shared sociotechnical imaginaries (see Jasanoff & Ki, 2015) and stories-so-far, and as such influencing the ways in which an educational program is experienced – will this content provide me a new job, if not why should I? There is a real risk such stories will commoditise education (see for instance Giroux, 2014), mitigating aims and ends as something emerging through action and not as ready prior to any inquiry. However, shared stories might be valuable, somewhat homogenic, entry point to understand heterogenic ways of experiencing education.

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