



Identity Reflection: students and societies in transition

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ABSTRACT

This article applies concepts from identity theory to the area of transformational education for sustainability. According to postmodern conceptions, universities are already transforming students' identities by guiding them into particular disciplinary or professional identities through implicit and explicit rules for how students must present themselves orally and in writing. Underlying these rules is a particular disciplinary-based model of reality that may well have been forged at a time when environmental limits were not recognised and the general project of society was further industrialisation and unbridled economic growth. In order for students to contribute to a more sustainable society it will be necessary for them to be critically aware of the identities that universities are guiding them into and exercise creativity to reforge those identities in the context of the changing world around them. The article concludes that introducing students to identity theory and allowing them to engage in identity reflection has the potential to help them gain flexible professional identities that are responsive to and responsible for the larger changes in the world around them.

Introduction

Quilley (2009) describes how education systems tend to be based on the assumption of *continuity* – the idea that providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to play a functional role within society as it currently is will be sufficient to guarantee their future. He continues:

However, after the roller coaster year of 2008, the spectre of *discontinuity* – geo-political conflict, social upheaval and systemic failure – seems suddenly plausible....
(Quilley, 2009, p.43)

There is a convergence of factors which make it seem increasingly likely that the future that universities are preparing their students for

will be very different from the current state of the world. Much of what has been called 'progress' depends on a readily available cheap supply of oil, but production of oil is set to peak and start declining in the near future (UKERC, 2009). Climate change is set to have a major impact, not only in extreme weather events and sea level rises but also through the legalisation aimed at mitigating it. A society that produces 80% less carbon dioxide is likely to be modelled on entirely different principles from current society; that is, if climate change legislation is successful. And if the legislation fails then a society struggling to cope with a four or more degree global temperature rise would also be very different from the current society (IPPC, 2007). There is also the likelihood of water shortage (UNEP, 2007), escalating ecosystem degradation (MEA, 2005), resource conflicts, and unknown economic dangers ahead owing to the global nature of corporate fraud. This raises profound questions about identity in the 21st century, about what it means to take the role of a parent, a teacher, a businessman, or any other role within an unsustainable society, a society on a trajectory towards collapse.

As Roberts (2007) points out, sustainability is an example of a threshold concept. Threshold concepts are those which are:

transformative (occasioning a significant shift in the perception of a subject), *irreversible* (unlikely to be forgotten, or unlearned only through considerable effort), and *integrative* (exposing the previously hidden interrelatedness of something). In addition they may also be *troublesome*.
(Meyer & Land, 2005, p.373)

One person who crossed the threshold and 'got' sustainability is Ray Anderson, former CEO of Interface, a large US carpet manufacturing corporation. In response to questions from customers in the 1990s about the environmental performance of his company, Anderson was asked to present his environmental vision to staff. He did not have one. However, he describes how at that moment Paul Hawken's Book *The Ecology of Commerce* landed on his desk, and he came across the expression – for the first time – 'the death of birth' (Anderson, 2005). To continue in his own words:

It was E.O. Wilson's expression for species extinction, the death of birth, and it was the point of a spear into my chest, and I read on and the spear became deeper, and it was an epiphanous experience, a total change of mindset for myself, and a change of paradigm.
(Anderson, 2005)

At this point, then, Anderson 'got' the threshold concept of sustainability, and the result was a deep mental restructuring not only at the level of 'mindset' but at the level of who he felt himself to be, his identity:

One day early in this journey it dawned on me that the way I was running Interface was the way of the plunderer. Plundering something that's not mine. Something that belongs to every creature on earth. [I realised that] someday people like me will end up in jail....
(Anderson, 2005)

The shift is profound, moving from a societal identity which he expresses as 'by our civilisation's definition I am a captain of industry ... a modern day hero' (Anderson, 2005) to taking on the self-identity of a 'plunderer' – 'I stand convicted by me myself alone, not anyone else, as a plunderer of the Earth' (Anderson, 2005).

The reason why many find it so hard to get over the threshold of understanding sustainability is because in doing so they might feel they have invalidated who they are and their life's work; however, the period where people feel that the person they used to be is no longer relevant or ethical in the current conditions of the world is only a 'liminal state' – an in-between state between two more solid and comfortable identities (Meyer & Land, 2005, p.374). In making a transition to a new identity, an individual 'must strip away, or have stripped from them, the old identity. The period in which the individual is naked of self – neither fully in one category or another – is the liminal state' (Goethe in Meyer & Land, 2005, p.376). After his liminal period of self-doubt, Anderson took on the new identity of an ecologically sensitive business leader, which required reinventing himself and his company.

The key idea of this article is that rather than undergoing a painful transition of identity such as Ray Anderson's at a later stage, it would be far better for students to gain skills in identity reflection during their time at university. In this way they could ensure that their emerging professional and personal identities are responsive to and responsible towards the conditions of the world that they find themselves in. Instead of uncritically taking on a fixed disciplinary or professional identity, students could develop more fluid identities that allow them the flexibility to respond to the changing conditions of the 21st century. They could do this through gaining a critical understanding of identity theory and the debates which characterise it, and allowing what they discover to inform their academic and professional lives. This article overviews identity theory, drawing out implications for education and sustainability.

Identity theory

There are two main kinds of identity theory: essentialist ones which posit a core, authentic, true identity within each of us (e.g. Fleischer, 2005; Rogers, 1961); and postmodern theories which posit multiple, fractured identities that we slip in and out of without any of them being objectively 'us' (Sen, 2006; Hall, 1996; Featherstone, 1995; Britzman, 1994; Hall *et al.*, 1992). Postmodern theories are the ones that are most relevant for transformational aspects of learning because rather than seeing the self as fixed, they allow for the reinvention of self in response to the changing conditions of the world.

The postmodern idea of identity is 'a notion that accepts that me, myself and I are not a unified, singular entity, rather a strategic and increasingly fractured one – or many, multiply constructed across intersecting, and often antagonistic, discourses and practices' (Anderson, 2004, p.46). To illustrate this, Anderson quotes from Brian Keenan, who had plenty of time to reflect on his identity while a hostage in Beirut:

During my captivity I ... was forced to confront the man I thought I was and to discover that I was many people. I had to befriend these many people, discover their origins, introduce them to each other and find a communality between them ... 'myself' could never again be an easily defined and well-summed thing. (Keenan, in Anderson, 2004, p.45)

The idea of a fractured, multiple self can be viewed pessimistically as a crisis of identity, or, optimistically, as liberating, opening doors to new and evolving identities. In fact, a fixed identity is necessarily fragile, in that it needs to be constantly defended against external attack or against changes in the world which invalidate it. So an acceptance of multiple, fluid identities can, paradoxically, contribute to a more stable and grounded sense of self.

Importantly, postmodern perspectives see identities as being 'actively, ongoingly, and dynamically constituted in discourse' (Benwall & Stokoe, 2006, p.4; Hadden & Lester, 1978, p.33). In this view, identities such as those of parent, lecturer, economist, lawyer, or business executive are *performed* through speaking and writing and other forms of expression. In other words, identities are formed through the use of, for example, particular terminology, dialects, body language, visual images, or dress. Discourses are not just ways of talking or writing about the world – at a deeper level they encode ways of perceiving, thinking about, and modelling the world. Taking on the identity of an economist, for example, means taking on board

the discourse of economics, understanding the underlying models of reality that the discourse is based on, and then speaking and writing as if that those models were reality itself.

The optimistic aspect of the discursive construction of identity is that simply through changing discursive practices (writing, speaking and expressing ourselves in ways that are based on different models of reality) we can take on new identities. Of course there are limits to how much agency people can exert in taking on new identities because of inflexibility in social structures. If a business leader reinvents herself as someone who places wellbeing above profit then there are social and legal forces which will act to curb this direction; however, there is always some space available to creatively rewrite self, within the limits of structure. And if enough people are active in using their agency, then eventually the structures can change.

As Bowers (2003) points out, educational discourses were forged at a time when the climate was seen as stable, oil was seen as plentiful for the foreseeable future, ecosystems were seen as capable of supplying food and absorbing the waste of an expanding population, debt-fuelled economic growth was seen as unlimited, and the general social project was industrialisation, technological innovation and knowledge accumulation. If education is merely about reproducing out-of-date discourses and the identities that go with them then it is education for *unsustainability*. Instead, it is important that education prepares students to be reflective and critical about discourse and how it shapes their own identity, so that they can become flexible and align their identity with their values even as the conditions of the world change. Practically this requires students to gain skills in identity reflection.

Identity reflection

The very idea of students engaging in 'identity reflection' within a higher education setting – reflecting deeply on who they are as people and their journey towards becoming someone else – is something that is likely to be greeted with a great deal of unease. As Johnson & Holness (2003, p.217) point out, since the second world war there has been a deep suspicion about ideological indoctrination in the education system, and there are still those (e.g. Flew, 2000) who question the legitimacy of education aimed at creating more active and responsible citizens.

However, according to the postmodern identity theory outlined above, *universities are already shaping students' identities*, and doing so

in entirely implicit and unquestioned ways. Students are frequently given little choice about the kind of identity they want to take on. Instead they are simply informed that certain disciplinary ways of writing, speaking and thinking are 'correct' and must be performed if they want to graduate as a linguist, an engineer, a sociologist, a chemist or other professional identity. Students are allowed or required to be 'critical', but often only in the narrowly prescribed ways of the discipline, which may not extend to criticising the underlying foundations of the discipline or writing in ways which model an entirely different ontological stance. So in some disciplines, for example, it may be possible to make objective criticisms of previous theories, but not to question objectivity itself and instead write as a feeling, compassionate and embodied participant in the processes being analysed.

Part of the process of education is the transmission of facts or core knowledge to students, but, more importantly, what is conveyed is something deeper – the models of reality that the discipline is based on. Taking these models on board requires a shift in how students perceive reality and how they talk about it – a discursive shift. And with discursive shifts come new identities. As Meyer & Land (2005, p.374-5) point out:

It is hard to imagine any shift in perspective that is not simultaneously accompanied by (or occasioned through) an extension of the student's use of language. Through this elaboration of discourse new thinking is brought into being, expressed, reflected upon and communicated.... What is being emphasised here is the inter-relatedness of the learner's identity with thinking and language.
(Meyer & Land, 2005, p.375)

In other words, all the rules – explicit and implicit – which guide students in how they should talk and act in the classroom, how they should write their essays, how they should give presentations, all the assessment briefs, assessment criteria, regulations for assessment, referencing guides, feedback on written work, are guiding them into particular disciplinary identities. Reimann & Jackson (2003, p.7), for instance, assume that once students have 'got' the concepts of the discipline they will start 'to think like economists' and that 'their thinking about everyday economic problems in authentic situations should have changed as well'. In this view, students are seen as entering the identity of an economist by thinking and talking in new ways pre-defined for them by the discipline of economics. However, as Meyer & Land (2006) point out:

Such a transformed view or landscape may represent how people 'think' in a particular discipline or how they perceive, apprehend, or experience particular phenomena within that discipline.... It might, of course, be argued in a critical sense, that such transformed understanding leads to a privileged or dominant view and therefore a contestable way of understanding something. (Meyer & Land, 2006, p.3)

Given the recent economic collapse, we might ask whether we want students to 'think like economists', or instead to be critical of the underlying models of the world that are encoded in the disciplinary discourse of economics. If right from the start they are reflective and critical about the identities being imposed on them, then they can exercise creativity to forge identities which may deviate from the uniform disciplinary identity. This will be essential if we are to create economies and societies which are based on very different and more sustainable lines.

Students therefore have a double task: taking on the disciplinary identity that they are being firmly guided into by the university, but also updating and changing that identity so that it better takes account the conditions of the world around them. The former task is what Hayes-Conroy & Vanderbeck (2005, p.315) call *conformative* identity work (fitting into a pre-existing identity) and the latter is *critical identity work* (taking on the identity but in a creatively adapted form).

What this article is proposing is that students, right from the beginning of their degree programmes, are encouraged to become aware of the forces which shape their identity, and reflect on the identities that they are being guided into by the university. If they discover that they are being guided into identities which are at odds with the changing world around them, or irrelevant to their vision of a better future, then they can consider ways to resist those identities. This is a form of 'political subjectivity', a means of empowering learners to take a more active role in shaping their identity rather than just leaving it to the unquestioned social forces around them. As Hall (2004) writes:

The possibility that one can gain control over that which has controlled one's consciousness by becoming conscious of that dynamic of control is the premise of most twentieth-century theories of politicised subjectivity. (Hall, 2004, p.55)

This politicised subjectivity need not end when students graduate.

They can take identity reflection into their future career, reflecting deeply on the discourses that their employers are guiding them into, and reforging themselves to better respond to the changing conditions of the world. In that way they can avoid having a mid-career crisis in the way that Ray Anderson did, and ensure that what they do in their job aligns with their values even as the world changes. If students are not empowered like this at university, then all university is doing is preparing them to unquestioningly take up subject positions within an industrialised society on a path towards ecological collapse, and thereby contribute towards that collapse, rather than working towards ongoing appraisal and reinvention of self and society.

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