"I NOW SEE CPD AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF MY LIFE": AUTHORSHIP IN CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

KEYWORDS

AUTHORS

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ABSTRACT

The Actuarial Society of South Africa ('Actuarial Society') is piloting amended continuing professional development ('CPD') requirements. Cycles of work-based personal development are expected to support the delivery of a quality service better than the existing requirement to attend a minimum number of relevant events. Feedback from volunteers on the pilot project indicated that the proposals were effective in this regard. However, it was also observed that the reflective process embedded in the development cycle resulted in professionals authoring on-going positive revisions to their professional identity. Further, that strengthened professional identity might be leading to a 'virtuous circle' whereby the professional is in turn motivated to continue engaging in effective CPD. This paper explores this observation and the extent to which professional identity may be inscribed through a CPD programme which facilitates authentic professional development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The background to this paper was a review of contemporary theories and practices of CPD. In a collaboration between a practitioner and an academic, Lowther & McMillan (2014) explored frameworks which would assist members of the Actuarial Society to develop and maintain their commitment to honour their professional promise to deliver a service of quality as set out in the Code of Professional Conduct (Actuarial Society, 2012). This promise, covering technical, normative and professional oversight issues, was derived from recent conceptions of professionalism such as Friedson (2001) and Bellis (2000). The concept that CPD should address the development of professionals' capability to deliver a quality service has been highlighted in a number of professions. Boud & Hager (2011) note that authentic professional development cannot be pre-specified and standardised, over-simplified, divorced from practice or separated from group learning.

Lowther & McMillan (2014) concluded that professional development is most effective when associated with competently completing tasks which are required in the workplace and when encompassing all aspects of a development cycle – planning, action, results,

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and reflection. The experience of Actuarial Society members, as reflected in a survey in Lowther & McMillan (2014) tended to support this conclusion in that many reported that their professional development had been more than keeping up-to-date, and that the majority of this development had been work-based. Accordingly, the 'professional development value' (Friedman & Woodhead, 2008) of the Actuarial Society's existing CPD requirements was identified as "low". Those requirements were mainly that the actuary could verify their attendance at a minimum number of relevant technical and normative events. Lowther & McMillan (2014) therefore recommended that South African actuaries rather be encouraged to use work-based development cycles to maintain their capability to keep their professional promise to deliver a quality service.

The Actuarial Society took note of the findings from the research, and used these to develop an amended framework for CPD (Actuarial Society, 2014). A pilot project with 28 volunteers began in 2014. Instead of recording hours of attendance at events, these volunteers were required to apply development cycles and to record the process on a spreadsheet template. The template guides the participant to define their professional roles, assess their development needs, plan and carry out activities, and reflect and apply the development. Provision was also made for reflecting on unplanned workplace learning. The volunteers were surveyed after six months regarding the effectiveness of the new process. Their responses were generally supportive, but in addition, an unexpected issue emerged – that the reflective process embedded in the development cycle resulted in professionals authoring on-going positive revisions to their professional identity, much more so than in the traditional input-hours system. It was also noted how this strengthened professional identity might in turn be motivating the professional to continue engaging in effective CPD. This paper explores this observation and the extent to which professional identity may be inscribed through a CPD programme which facilitates authentic professional development.

The methodology of this study is described in the next Section. Section 3 briefly presents theoretical concepts of professional development and professional identity. Section 4 analyses the responses to the questionnaire in the light of these theoretical concepts, looking at evidence of the nature of professional development, the resulting strengthening of professional identity, and the virtuous circle of identity then supporting engagement with CPD.

2. METHODOLOGY

The authors were part of a work group of the Actuarial Society, monitoring the pilot project. An evaluative questionnaire regarding the effectiveness of the new process was drawn up by the work group and circulated to the 28 members who had volunteered for the pilot project. The survey questions are set out in the Appendix. Fourteen responses were received. The authors were tasked with analysing the responses for evidence of professional development and reflection. It is noted that the survey questions were not designed to elicit evidence of professional identity formation. However, the responses suggested that the CPD process fostered identity development. The authors then sought and received ethical clearance to investigate and report on the extent to which professional identity might be inscribed through a CPD programme which facilitates authentic professional development.

It is noted that development cycles were not complete for all the participants at the time of the data collection, as this was only an initial evaluation. It is also possible that those who volunteered may be a biased 'self-selected' sample. Because the survey questions

were designed for a different proposition, this study only looks for positive evidence of identity development. A more extensive project would be required to accept or reject the hypothesis regarding professional identity posited in this paper.

3. CONCEPTS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY
3.1 Professional development

Professional development is synonymous with learning in the workplace (Lowther & McMillan, 2014). Professional development can thus not be separated from other activities in organizations (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002; Gherardi et al, 1998). In the context of our CPD study, professional development was less about learning the basic competencies of the job – what is frequently described in studies of work-based learning (Corradi & Gherardi, 2008) – and more about struggling (Alvesson, 2010; Brown & Starkey, 2000) to perfect higher-order competencies "on the run" (Gold et al, 2007: 240) in order to be able to complete tasks required in the workplace – what Gherardi (2009) describes as "practice-based" learning, and what one of the respondents in the initial study described as "learning from your mistakes". Professional development for actuaries thus includes mastery of existing practices, innovation, and problem-solving (Amin & Roberts, 2008; Baxter & Chua, 2008; Carlile, 2002). Challenging, higher-order professional tasks might include the generation of a unique actuarial model, communicating complex numerical issues to clients with limited sophisticated numerical competence, or managing a department with colleagues outside the actuarial profession and whose scope of practice may be novel to the actuary-manager.

Professional development in the workplace is acquired on a day-to-day basis through action (Corradi & Gherardi, 2008; Cook & Brown, 1999) and reflection (Schon, 1983) – it is achieved through reflecting on what one does, interrogating the purposes of one's actions, and talking to others about what one is doing and thinking (Blaka & Filstad, 2007; Gherardi et al, 1998). Boud et al (1985: 19) define reflection in the context of learning as "those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings". Atkins and Murphy (1993) highlight that reflection is a process involving the self. Action and reflection thus have a personal component.

However, professional development is more than the acquisition of facts or practices (Gherardi et al, 1998). Rather, knowledge is created and the meaning of words, actions, situations and material artefacts are negotiated by groups of people in particular contexts (Corradi & Gherardi, 2008; Blaka & Filstad, 2007) – what might be referred to as "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998). The particular context – in this case, the actuarial workplace – is socially and culturally structured and is continuously reconstituted by those living and operating within it (Amin & Roberts, 2008; Blaka & Filstad, 2007). Action and reflection thus take place within a community of actuarial colleagues who have the potential to serve as both resources and sanctions (Amin & Roberts, 2008).

3.2 Professional identity

Wenger et al (2002) suggest that over time, professionals who work in association develop a unique perspective, a common body of knowledge, practices and approaches – and with these, a common sense of identity. Professional communities of practice are defined by their specific knowledge and skills, and the commitment to a particular set of beliefs and values (Friedson, 2001). This distinctive knowledge base, regulation, and ideology is what defines the professionalism of a particular profession (Torres, 1991).

Friedson (2001) highlights how the commitment to professionalism is characterised by an ideological shift away from checklists and input records to the emphasis on professional ethics and values. Mackay (2012) concludes that professionalism is central to professional identity as it defines the practitioner's attitude and behavioural orientation.

Professional identity appears to be fostered in the workplace through professional development – because professional development takes place through negotiation and within the context of communities of practice (Amin & Roberts, 2008). Professional development is thus not 'coming to know the world', *but is rather a way of becoming part of a particular social world* (Amin & Roberts, 2008). Professional development may be understood as the development of an identity based on participation in the system of situated practices (Wenger, 1998). New identity is thus constructed with reference to the colleagues with whom the professional is working on shared activities (Blaka & Filstad, 2007). This association, Gherardi and Nicolini (2002) suggest, results in a sense of accountability to these colleagues. Identity is constructed through self-interpretation of the social norms of the professional group in the workplace and further afield in the profession as well as feedback regarding appropriateness of behaviour from professional peers (Mackay, 2012; Amin & Roberts, 2008).

Professional identity may also be constructed through the reflection associated with authentic professional development. This association results from the relational nature of reflection (Gherardi et al, 1998). Reflection demands that the practitioner engages at the interface between themselves, their being-in-the-world, the abstract knowledge, and other knowing subjects (Gherardi et al, 1998). It also requires that the practitioner engages in self-interpretation of the social norms of the professional group in the workplace and with feedback regarding appropriateness of behaviour from colleagues (Mackay, 2012).

Mackay (2012) suggests that CPD practices that require engagement with professional beliefs and values operate as a dimension of identity construction because they require the professional to reflect on the meaning of the task and the mechanisms of its completion within the professional knowledge base, its regulatory practices, and associated ideology (Torres, 1991). One metaphor of identity is that of struggle – active efforts to fight through contradictions and messiness in pursuit of a sense of self (Alvesson, 2010). Brown and Starkey (2000) use the struggle metaphor to highlight how identity is shaped through diligent self-reflection. It is arguable therefore that *a CPD system that challenges the professional to resolve what Pratt et al (2006) dub 'work-identity integrity violations' – rather than a system which requires mere attendance at events – is likely to have a more profound effect on identity.*

4. FINDINGS
Analysis of the initial feedback on the pilot gives some indication that the reflective process embedded in the new model of CPD, framed by perceptions of belonging to a particular professional community, with associated norms, values, practices, and knowledge base, resulted in participants authoring on-going positive revisions to their professional identities. Further, that this strengthened identity in turn encouraged commitment to CPD.

4.1 Authentic professional development
4.1.1 Professional development as practice-based
Professional development was positioned as integrated into the other activities of the workplace (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002; Gherardi et al, 1998). It was thus associated with work-based task completion and for many of the respondents was explicitly framed as "work", "I am already doing this … at work (H)"; "I started recording more specific detail of work done and development actions taken (C)". Indeed, for some of the respondents, the authentic nature of the new CPD system presented a challenge exactly because the tasks being worked through and reflected upon were so integrated into existing workplace practices, "Delineating activities (is challenging) because they form part of my role (I)". For more senior actuaries the new CPD system was associated with work-based practices in that they implicitly located the development cycle within what they currently did at work, "It has been immediately helpful to me, despite more than 30 years post-qualification experience (C)". Further, while some of the actuaries did not specifically mention work-based tasks, they associated the new CPD system with career-pathing – which suggests that they experienced a relationship between the new CPD system and 'getting it right' at work, "It's tailored to my unique development within my particular career path (I)". For this actuary, the new CPD system was meaningful exactly because it was associated with workplace requirements.

4.1.2 Professional development through reflection and interrogation
It was evident that learning through the new CPD system was achieved through reflection on what the actuary was doing professionally and interrogating the purposes of his/ her actions (Blaka & Filstad, 2007; Gherardi et al, 1998). Respondents explicitly associated the process with reflection. This reflection was expressed in terms of thinking about what they needed to learn, "more valuable as you really need to think about what you need to know (A)", thinking about what they had learnt, "include a column for … what I have learnt (F)"; thinking about how they should take their professional development further, "include a 'next step' section for 'desired future roles' and areas perhaps not assessed in a given year (F)", and thinking about how to use feedback (a common conception of reflection in actuarial practice), "I think this system is ideally suited to actuaries, who … have … a good understanding of feedback systems (C)". Words associated with the reflective process and the interrogation of action were evident in much of the feedback, "*consider* my various roles (B)"; "useful to *link* various roles to specific development needs (C)". The data also suggested that the actual process of engaging with the new CPD cycle (planning, action, results, and reflection) facilitated interrogation of purpose, "(it was difficult) deciding what to put down and how to assess it (G)".

4.2 Professional development strengthens professional identity
4.2.1 Reflecting with others
Reflection is positioned as seminal to learning (Schon, 1983). Identity is implicated in both learning and its associated reflection because of the way in which professional development is understood to be relational (Gherardi et al, 1998) – as a conversation between the practitioner and other knowing subjects (Gherardi et al, 1998). While the data collected through the evaluation of the pilot offered no explicit evidence that the respondents engaged in reflective practices in which others participated – in other words, no conversations appeared to be have been held – there is strong evidence that a conversation did take place during the reflective process. This conversation was between the participant and his/ her assumptions of the expectations of professional colleagues (Blaka & Filstad, 2007) – a self-interpretation of the professional norms of peers (Mackay, 2012). Thus reflective practice was relational – although the

relationship was with a perception of community expectations rather than with actual colleagues within the community of practice. Assumptions about feedback from colleagues regarding appropriateness of behaviour – rather than actual feedback (Mackay, 2012) – shaped the respondents' reflective processes.

4.2.2 Reflection, professional development, and identity
It was the way in which the new system required reflection on the professional development and its process that 'forced' the respondents to engage with what colleagues might think about them as actuaries. While it is arguable that these actuaries might already have been interested in engaging with their own professionalism since they had elected to participate in a pilot advertised as intended to improve competence for service delivery, we suggest that a learning cycle that includes a reflective component encourages reflection on the integration of professional knowledge bases, regulatory practices, and associated ideology (Torres, 1991). This reflection shapes professional identity – as one respondent put it, "I now see CPD as an integral part of my life, rather than a chore (A)". We would therefore argue that the reflective process embedded in the development cycle results in professionals authoring on-going positive revisions to their professional identity – much more so that in the traditional input-hours system.

4.3 Professional identity in turn shapes learning
Identity was at the heart of the professional development which these respondents recorded as a result of their engagement with the new system of CPD. It was their identity as an actuary – constructed through their assumptions of what a good actuary should be and do and how adherence to these ways of being and doing should be demonstrated to colleagues – that shaped their engagement with the new CPD system and its associated emphasis on professional development. The process is clearly iterative – with identity shaping the way in which these professionals engaged with a CPD system which emphasised professional development and associated reflection – and identity being further developed as a result of the way in which the reflective process placed the practitioner and his/ her practices back within the framework of the norms and values of the community of practice.

The preceding discussion has highlighted the way in which perceptions of belonging to a particular community of practice shaped the respondents' assumptions about the purpose of, and how they should engage in, the new CPD programme. It was evident that conceptions of professionalism – including assumptions regarding accountability to the professional body and adherence to a set of behaviours sanctioned by professional peers (McKay, 2012; Friedson, 2001; Torres, 1991) – shaped the professional development practices of those actuaries piloting the new CPD programme. Respondents positioned themselves as adhering to this normative framework. This adherence was usually expressed in terms of taking the new CPD process seriously, whether this attitude was to do the activity in a particular way, "I have an 'active' version of the spreadsheet on my computer, and have developed the habit of updating it continuously, rather than once a month (C)" or to argue that the activity should be done in a particular way, "(Whether this approach to CPD adds value to my on-going professional development) depends on how regularly I look at the plan – it should be once a week (D)".

Adherence to what was perceived of as a shared set of values was at the heart of engaging in professional development. The new CPD programme was thus considered a good learning tool and an opportunity to develop the competencies to be an even better

actuary because the participants believed that it helped to identify what they needed to learn so as to do their job better, "It helps identify training needs (F)"; "forced to focus on what you do (E)"; "It grounds development needs much better than hours-based CPD could ever do (B)"; Identity was thus at the heart of the development process (Mackay, 2012; Amin & Roberts, 2008) – it was their existing identity, and their assumptions about what it meant to be that kind of professional, which was drawn upon in order to learn.

5. CONCLUSION

Feedback from volunteers on the pilot project indicated that the cycles of work-based personal learning fostered authentic professional development. It was also observed that the reflective process embedded in the development cycle resulted in professionals authoring on-going positive revisions to their professional identity. Further, that strengthened professional identity led to a 'virtuous circle' whereby the professional is in turn motivated to continue engaging in effective CPD.

However, the analysis of the feedback from the participants in the pilot programme highlighted that the new CPD programme did not require that participants engage with others in the process of their reflection. Since the literature on communities of practice highlights the role that reflection plays in professional learning, a new peer-consultation component will be suggested to the Actuarial Society for incorporation into the new development cycle-based CPD system.

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APPENDIX – SURVEY QUESTIONS:

How did you find the exercise of considering your development needs and plans:

   (a) What worked well for you?
   (b) What did you find difficult?
   (c) Can you suggest ways to make it easier for you?
   (d) Have you identified, or do you foresee, any problems that could complicate the implementation of this system?
   (e) Does the approach add value to your ongoing professional development?
   (f) What can be done to increase the value-add?
   (g) How did you find this approach in comparison to the current hours-based CPD system? More valuable / less valuable in respect of professional development? More onerous / less onerous to record?
   (h) Any other feedback?