# Crossing boundaries, building bridges in the academic apprenticeship

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## Abstract

This paper reflects on the experiences of the three authors who participated in the CROSSLIFE study program. CROSSLIFE was a European Union supported experimental program for VET professionals enrolled in post-graduate programs at the member universities (Monash, Tampere (Finland), London Institute of Education, Malta, Zurich and Copenhagen). The eighteen-month program involved participation in three workshops in London, Finland and Malta. One aim of the workshops was to support the development of the skills, knowledge and capacities needed for cross-cultural communication and collaboration in teaching, learning and work in a globally interconnected world (Seddon, 2008).

A range of cross-cultural issues arose when members of the Monash home-group, from different backgrounds, organisations, cultures and disciplines, collaborated on a common task with flexible guidelines in preparation for the Malta workshop. The task was to employ diverse ways to present local issues raised by selected 'readings' on how pedagogical practices travel globally.

Following the work of Kraus & Sultana (2008), the intention of this presentation is to explore "the complex and challenging processes that come into play in cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary settings" from the perspective of experienced VET practitioners undertaking an academic apprenticeship.

The issues addressed include the challenges in establishing a 'community of practice', identification and negotiation of boundaries, shared spaces and understandings, development of capacities for cross cultural communication and collaboration across local and national boundaries through various mediums, competence building through mentoring relationships with other students and academics and collegial and peer support.

## Introduction

This paper examines the border-crossing issues encountered by VET learners and teachers as they make the transition into a new "learning culture" (Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2000, p. 188). It is based on our experiences as VET practitioners engaged in the CROSSLIFE study program, a European Union supported experimental program for VET professionals enrolled in post-graduate programs at six partner universities (Monash, Tampere (Finland), London Institute of Education, Malta, Zurich and Copenhagen). The eighteen-month program involved participation by the university 'home groups' in three workshops in London, Finland and Malta. One aim of the workshops was to support the development of the skills, knowledge and capacities needed for cross-cultural communication and collaboration in teaching, learning and working in a globally interconnected world (Seddon, 2008).

The CROSSLIFE study program provided opportunities for small groups of professionals and researchers, who work in adult education and vocational education, to learn about transformations in lifelong learning and work around the world by participating in cross-national workshops. The main aim of this program was to create cross-national learning environments for participants from different research, professional and national disciplines and cultures to acquire more knowledge about changes in education and work due to globalisation and movements of people and ideas. Furthermore, it was hoped that this cross-cultural collaboration would provide participants with opportunities to increase their research-based expertise and skills and establish networks.

The third workshop, held in Malta, explored how pedagogies could be created to facilitate cross-cultural conversations, termed "travelling pedagogies". Participants continued the pathway, established in previous workshops in London and Tampere, of building skills, attitudes and knowledge to engage in meaningful and thought-provoking dialogue across cultures.

The five participants in the Monash home group are undertaking VET-related post-graduate research in their particular areas of professional expertise and were VET professionals working in the fields of Community Services Education, Access Programs, Policy Development and Art and Design. One participant was engaged in cultural competence training in the industry and education sectors. The group contained two Masters of Education by Research candidates and three doctoral candidates in PhD and Ed.D. Each student was at a different stage of his or her candidature.

This paper represents the reflections of three members of the Monash home group about a 'critical incident', the experience of preparing the collaborative presentation for the CROSSLIFE workshop in Malta, which resonated with our areas of VET research, namely: Building the capacity of teachers to develop cultural competence to work effectively in culturally diverse contexts; strengthening the relationship between the classroom and workplace for culturally diverse students; and issues facing second-chance learners returning to study, who fail to successfully make the transition, with a particular interest in the interface between identity work and the institutional learning culture, informed by the work of Vincent Tinto (1988, 2005), McInnis et al (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000), and Martinez & Munday (1998).

Similarities existed between the participants, in that we are involved in teaching VET learners in the classroom and in the workplace, where we deliver our programs to a multicultural student cohort. Similarities of program delivery exist, for example, Information Technologies are used extensively within our current workplaces and classrooms. Each of us has a strong commitment to social equity in education.

The task for the Monash home group involved creating an innovative presentation on workplace learning, based on core readings and our national context. This task was an extension of the continuing theme of travelling ideas from earlier workshops in London and Finland. In their planning, the CROSSLIFE partners looked at the challenges that arose for themselves as academics in attempting to cross borders (Kraus & Sultana, 2008). Similarly, the process of developing a presentation by the Monash home group represented a 'critical incident' and window to reflect on the cultural "border-crossing" and negotiation of identity.

Throughout this paper, we will draw on insights from Kraus and Sultana (2008) and others to investigate the similarities and differences of the cross-cultural issues experienced by academic tutors and the participating graduate students. The first part of the paper will explore the general meaning of culture, with a discussion about the academic apprenticeship as a process of enculturation and identity-formation. The second part will report on the cultural aspects experienced by the academic apprentices during the production of the Monash home-group production for the Malta workshop and reflect on its significance for VET teaching in a multi-cultural context.

**Literature review**

*What is 'culture'?*

Williams (1983, p. 87) notes that culture is "one of the two or three most difficult words in the English language" (cited in Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2007). Kraus & Sultana (2008) describe culture as a social category, which is a result of a "lifelong development process" of 'socialisation' or 'enculturation' within a particular context.

> "Growing up in a certain cultural context entails the imparting of these meanings, practices and tools of discourse. This process is not necessarily explicit, but is more likely to be implicit, involving what can be referred to as 'embodied' knowledge" (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 16).

In endeavouring to gain more understanding of the challenges involved in cross-cultural collaboration, Kraus & Sultana considered the following three aspects of culture: 'National identities', 'gendered identities' and 'disciplinary identities'. They argue that "there is no such thing as a closed, homogenous national culture, but there are national states as 'imagined communities' that are influential in shaping the individual's identity and behavior and to some extent lead to 'cultural homogeneity' within the defined national borders" (2008, p. 62).

They refer to 'Gendered identity' as to whether one is a 'woman' or a 'man', their associated identities within 'national borders' and 'national cultures' and the implications that this could have in "structuring cross-cultural collaboration".

Disciplinary identities refer to collaborative ventures involving researchers from diverse disciplines and are inclined to be formed in ad hoc ways. Cross-cultural work across disciplines also requires an effort to develop dispositions and competencies that enable individuals to 'read', 'translate' and 'decode' the work of colleagues, and to converse in their 'language'.

*Academic apprenticeship and the development of a scholarly identity*

The Kraus & Sultana article was written by academics who are established members of a research or scholarly culture. Our article was written by beginning researchers who are at different stages of the academic enculturation process.
Undertaking a post-graduate research degree was "historically conceived as an academic apprenticeship" where the "students learned the practices of their discipline and came to share its cultural values, norms and canonical knowledge" (Hopwood, 2008). Thus it is a process of 'socialisation' or 'enculturation' where "individuals interact with others and with their broader environment" (Kraus & Sultana, 2008, p. 61).

Schoenfeld (1999b) suggests that there is a need to undertake a systematic study of how the process of undertaking how an 'academic apprenticeship' really works in preparing graduate students to become education researchers. Schoenfeld (1999a, p. 200) argues "that it is extremely valuable for beginning researchers to live in communities where basic research issues are worked out 'in public' and where the nature of the community is such that it supports their easy entry and facilitates their moves towards centrality".

While it is acknowledged that the process of 'enculturation' is a "lifelong development process" (Kraus & Sultana, 2008, p. 61), the change in demographics of the majority of academic apprentices means that for many students this process may not truly commence until after the completion of their doctorate, if then. In Australia,

as in the UK, there is increasing diversity within the post-graduate population as a result of government policies such as widening the access to higher education. Historically the post-graduate student trod a well worn linear path from secondary school student to early researcher. They were "21-22 years old, study[ing] full time, and geographically mobile" (Hopwood, 2008, Problem #4). This demographic has changed. Many students undertaking post-graduate studies, especially in education, are now "older, studying part time, and often have significant family and other commitments that tie them to particular places" (Problem #4: Ignoring the majority). For part time and mature aged students the opportunities to interact with others and the broader environment are limited. Similar issues are experienced by the VET students where the demands of employment, part-time or full-time, can lead to students "becoming disengaged from their educational experience" (McInnis, et al., 2000, p. 2).

A common problem for many education post-graduate students (especially part-timers) is that they only experience the enculturation process in terms of "text work" (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 15) as this is the main form of 'assessment'. For a student working alone in an 'ivory tower', the process of enculturation is more difficult and slower – and may even contribute to relatively high non-completion rates for post-graduates and the difficulty experienced by new researchers in making the transition to being a 'contributing academic'.

In their discussion of 'identity work', Kamler and Thomson (2006, p. 15-17) suggest that 'identity' is plural, not singular and that it is not fixed, but always in formation and continually being remade. They also propose that the scholarly identity is a social category, bringing together "questions of class, gender, race, and ethnicity, dis/ability, age, location and religion" (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 16).

As professionals with professional identities, we have specific skills and experience in our individual workplaces and are able to operate at comfortable levels in these environments. The same could be said about our level of operation and other identities in specific areas of interest where there is a high degree of familiarity and comfort. However, as academic apprentices, we have all acknowledged feelings of discomfort,

insecurity and isolation at times. Thus, while we may feel confident about our professional and other identities, we may still be developing our academic identities.

Thus there is a stronger sense of vulnerability, emotional angst and elation experienced in the development of the 'scholarly identity' of the 'academic apprentice' (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 27). This highlights one of the main differences between our experiences and those of the tutors when participating in a multi-cultural workshop. We are focusing on the issues of cross-cultural collaboration from the perspective of apprentices in the process of enculturation while the tutors were all 'established' in the national/global research community/culture. Also, as Australians we assumed that we were from the same culture while the tutors were clearly from different cultures. These differences will be explored in some detail in the remainder of this article.

**Research method**

This paper is a result of reflective practice rather than formal research (Metz, 2001). One of the objectives of CROSSLIFE was to use "activities to project a model of academic apprenticeship that addresses what and how people need to learn in order to do academic work in globally connected times" (Seddon, 2007, p. 6). Reflection on our learning process and its applications to our research and teaching in the VET sector was encouraged throughout the project. Following the group presentation at the Malta workshop the three authors continued this reflective approach, both individually and collectively.

Following the Malta workshop, three of the Monash Home group students engaged in a continuing online discussion, supported by several face-to-face meetings. These email discussions focused on the presentation, the Malta workshop and its impact on our teaching and research. Reflection about the process of developing the content for the group presentation, suggested that any difficulties that arose in negotiating shared understandings within our apparently culturally-homogenous group appeared to be similar to those experienced by the culturally-diverse tutors in their planning work (Kraus & Sultana, 2008). The process of preparing a presentation became a window to

throw light on "the complex and challenging processes that come into play in cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary settings" (p. 59).

Inspired by the use of reflective learning journals throughout CROSSLIFE and the 'Critical Incident Technique' employed by the tutors following their planning workshop (Kraus & Sultana, 2008, p. 67), the authors wrote a personal account which reflected on the "issues, tensions and difficulties" they experienced during the process of developing the group presentation. This strategy is advocated by Kamler & Thomson (2006, p. 68) as an aid to the "development of reflexivity" rather than just being reflective. "Reflexivity means looking for the social in the individual account" and "learning not to take for granted the ways in which we have narrativized our identities" (p. 66).

Revisiting the original email dialogue generated during the development of the presentation provided a counter-balance to the "stories that we [had] comfortably (re)produce[d]" (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 67), as our reflections began to coalesce into a collective narrative which rationalised our involvement in the process.

Comments and reflections on our presentation were also sought from other members of the Monash Home Group and selected tutors from the other participating Universities.

**Findings and discussion**

It is relevant to the findings to describe the composition of the CROSSLIFE planning team and the Monash Home Group. This will enable us to consider the similarities and differences experienced by groups which consist of individuals from different or similar cultural backgrounds.

The CROSSLIFE planning workshop partners included an academic from Australia, three from Finland, two from Malta, two from Switzerland and two from the UK. Some had worked together on previous projects, while others were new to each other (Kraus & Sultana, 2008, p. 80, Note 4). In contrast, the Monash Home Group was comprised of five Australian post-graduate mature-aged students: Two part-time

Master of Education (Research) students, two full-time and one part-time doctoral students. The three female and two male participants varied in their professional backgrounds, experience and areas of research, but shared an interest in Vocational Education and Training, which had drawn them to an involvement in CROSSLIFE. Some had worked together before, while others had recently joined the CROSSLIFE study group.

When the Malta workshop concluded, we commenced a series of ongoing discussions about our individual learning experiences and the processes involved in the production and delivery of the presentation. E-mail discussions enabled participants to engage with and articulate their academic journey, highlighted by some issues and difficulties encountered while developing the presentation task. In the process of negotiating shared understandings through collaboration, we were each challenged to examine the validity of our own perspectives and to contribute them appropriately to the whole, in a creative intellectual process. The following excerpts from e-mail correspondence point to the contribution of reflection and dialogue to enculturation and the development of academic identity in an 'intellectual border-crossing':

> "On reflection, being involved in the group process of getting our presentation together and feeling a sense of personal responsibility too, presented a more difficult task for me than any of the cross-cultural collaboration that took place between all the different nationalities involved in Malta and Finland" (Monash participant 1, e-mail personal communication, 1 Nov 2008).

> "The difficulties that I identified or encountered in getting a presentation together for Malta involved time and the issue of getting agreement when working collaboratively with people who all have differing perspectives" (Monash participant 2, e-mail personal communication, 2 Feb, 2009).

In academic collaboration, as in VET teaching, there can be a risk of disappointed expectations of others or of task outcomes. However, as Seddon (2008) has observed, activity-based teaching strategies can be used to "encourage people to build their confidence in thinking work by working on the relationship between university perspectives and their own everyday working lives".

During our planning discussions, we focused on the three main phases of the development process of the presentation. These were:

1.  Negotiation and selection of the thematic theme of the presentation
2.  Selection and development of the 'innovative' presentation format
3.  Delivery of the presentation to a multi-cultural audience

We can usefully use these headings to mark stages in the development of the presentation, with an emphasis on the process undertaken, our reflections on the issues and challenges we experienced, whether these issues might be a result of our different cultural perspectives and the degree of academic enculturation indicated. However, some difficulties emerged in maintaining a reflexive approach to this study.

As with Kraus & Sultana (2008), we decided to focus on the cultural issues we encountered during the production of the presentation. We wished to focus on the "social in the individual account" (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, pp. 66-67), in order to deepen our understanding of the cultural aspects of group work. As VET teachers working in multi-cultural contexts, we are endeavouring to gain a deeper understanding of the issues experienced by our students as they undergo the transition from one learning culture to another.

One major difficulty that the tutors experienced in writing up their 'critical incidents' was being able to "disentangle cultural from other issues, including personal ones" (Kraus & Sultana, 2008, pp. 68). Some of the Monash home-group participants encountered similar difficulties in discussing and writing up our critical incidents. As part-time and full-time students, we were at different stages of our academic apprenticeships. We originated from five different work environments with different expertise, work-related and research skills, knowledge and time constraints.

*Negotiation and selection of the thematic theme of the presentation*

As part of the preparation for the Malta presentation, each home group was required to read two core 'readings' and select one other article with a particular thematic

focus. The readings were organised around six themes, related to the overall theme of 'travelling pedagogies'.

Selecting one of the above themes was a protracted negotiation process. This was partly due to our diverse professional interests. Eventually a consensus was reached, with 'Workplace learning' selected as the theme that resonated with each of our Australian VET workplaces.

E-mail discussions revealed differing use of workplace and academic terminology among participants. It was necessary to negotiate shared understandings about the use of language in order to reach a successful outcome.

Despite all participants in the home group being native English speakers, unlike European participants who spoke other languages and used "English as the language medium" (Kraus & Sultana, 2008, p. 74), the differing backgrounds of some of the academic apprentices meant that domain-specific 'jargon' was sometimes evident, representing a 'cultural' difference in itself. Our reflections indicated that the immediacy of the spoken word during meetings sometimes made communication and immediate comprehension more difficult for some participants. Our findings have linked this to the different stages of academic apprenticeship, professional backgrounds, experiences of education and workplace learning and research focuses among the five participants. Similarly, Watson (2008, p. 44) highlights the importance of language for VET students who see TAFE as a pathway to higher education - "The transition from vocational to higher education is not an easy pathway for some students. Those admitted on the basis of a TAFE award often struggle to meet university expectations regarding academic literacy".

*Selection and development of the 'innovative' presentation format*

Within the group, there was a spectrum of interpretation of the guidelines for the task that seemed to reflect the value differences and VET teaching contexts of the participants. The significance of this relates to the work of Hodkinson et al (2007, p. 420), who note that "the task for a cultural approach to learning is to understand how particular practices impact upon the learning opportunities of the participants".

In our findings, one of the most pertinent difficulties was around the medium of communication involving the use of technology. After a fair amount of discussion concerning the type of format for the home group presentation in Malta, it was agreed that it would be presented in a web-based design. Issues arose concerning values, timelines and perceptions of the task.

*Delivery of the presentation to a multi-cultural audience*

We now recognise that our evaluations of the effectiveness of this fifteen-minute presentation were based on a set of assumptions from our workplace roles in VET, in different learning cultures, rather than from our developing academic perspective. In the 'real' classroom, we have more scope for experimenting with ideas, evaluating the effectiveness of the 'lesson' and then developing 'fixes' or further extensions to the concepts before presenting it again.

**Conclusion**

Developing and presenting a collaborative presentation was a valuable component of the professional learning experience, stimulating focused discussion and providing us with valuable insights into transition processes involved in undertaking an academic apprenticeship and induction into a professional community of learners. It highlighted the difficulties and successes in working together with participants from diverse fields, in what initially appeared a familiar, safe and local environment and brought to the foreground the cultural processes that are involved in forming a scholarly identity.

Throughout this reflective process, we have developed a greater sense of connection with the VET research practices of professionals and researchers in other parts of the world. 'Imagined borders' no longer exist for us. Our global networks have increased significantly and we now feel more connected to the 'global research world'.

As professional VET educators, we have realised that we are undergoing an 'enculturation' process in our academic apprenticeship in the same way as many of

our students, whether as a new Australian, second-chance or mature-age learner returning to study. As a student, participating in a cross-cultural environment in another country, our understanding and perspectives were enhanced concerning non-native English speaking students in our classrooms.

In the development and delivery of our presentation in Malta, through our involvement with our home group and our subsequent findings, we have developed a deeper awareness of different 'cultures' within individuals and groups. When considering our large country, which includes six states and two territories with individual 'state borders', 'state cultures', 'city cultures', 'rural cultures', 'group cultures' and 'family cultures' and the implications of relocation and border crossings, which is a way of life for many citizens, it is understandable that cultural differences will occur in opinions and levels of understanding among any group of people.

Participation in CROSSLIFE alerted the three authors to the pedagogical implications of teaching ethnically diverse students, especially those who are involved in transition to a new learning culture. Parallels exist between the development of a scholarly identity of VET teachers returning to post-graduate studies and second-chance learners who are returning to study the senior certificates at a metropolitan TAFE.

In our view, it is essential that we widen our understanding of cultural diversity in individuals and groups, not looking on this as a stumbling block to communication but rather as a unique aid to enhance our existing knowledge and personal, professional and academic journeys. As one participant observed, "Participation gave me a better understanding of myself as a learner in a cultural context, who could relate my experiences to my students in VET who come from many different countries."

enthusiastic participation of all students and tutors throughout the eighteen month CROSSLIFE project. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge the insightful comments of the members of the Faculty of Education WorkLAB network at Monash University during the initial planning of this paper and presentation.

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