The Paradox of Work-Placement Identity: Exploring the Challenges of Role Transition from Students to Interns in the Workplace

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Abstract:

Available research on internship has focused on the determinants of its effectiveness to highlight the importance of students' dyadic relationships with line-managers and colleagues, the variety and significance of their tasks along with organizational environment and social activities (see e.g. Narayanan et al., 2010; Sobral and Islam, 2015; D'Abate et al., 2009). While it has also been argued that students play a significant role in shaping their internship experience (see Clark and Zukas, 2016; Liu et al., 2014), there is little valuable research available exploring role transition from students to interns. Such insights will have implications for internship students' work-based learning that may (or may not) contribute towards their future employability and career prospects.

The intellectual puzzle underpinning our research addresses how placement students/interns reflect and negotiate the ambiguous and often conflicting role expectations of being a student as well as an organizational member in the workplace. This act of balancing roles can often become daunting, leading students to lose sight of their overall purpose i.e. learning.

Ashforth (2001: 290) describes role transition as 'how one disengages from one role (role exit) and engages in another (role entry)'. We position ourselves slightly differently to Ashforth, as instead of focusing on the micro-role transitions within the workplace (e.g. promotions), we remain interested in the macro-role transition from university to the placement organization.

In this paper, we argue that identities often become destabilised and disrupted during macro-level transitions across organisational boundaries i.e. university to the placement organisation. This can lead to conflicts between the role of students, who remain enrolled with their university programme, and interns, who see themselves as student-practitioners. We aim to untangle the complex relationship between work and placement identities, often intertwined and taken-for-granted in work-based learning (WBL) arrangements (e.g. internships or placement programmes).

Using the lens of narrative identities, we offer insights into intra- and inter-personal processes of identity alignment in dealing with these role tensions. Based on our

analysis of students' reflective accounts of their internship experience, we present the concept of *work-placement identity* – a construct that highlights the intra- and inter-personal dimensions of role acquisition for understanding the constituents of a dual identity. In so doing, we draw on our analysis of 154 students' monthly reflective accounts of their internship experience to highlight the implications of intra- and inter-personal processes of identity alignment to better understand their internship experience within organizational settings. Through our reflectively led WBL design, which aims to bring to fore the complexity of work roles undertaken by interns, enabling both learning in and from the workplace, we demonstrate the inherent tensions of identity transition in the workplace. We find that self-conceptions about placement and pre-conceptualisations of work roles, influence students' identity construction as practitioners. Finally, we posit that it is within this identity work that opportunities for informal (and deep) learning are created and development of work-readiness takes place.

As highlighted by Sobral and Islam (2015) the need to make the organisation conducive to internship experience, our research offers insights into understanding how role transitions occur and at what levels – insights we believe will be useful for organizational members facilitating student internships as well as for informing work-based pedagogical designs.

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