Chapter 12

The Transformative Within: Resumes and Sense of “Work Self”

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ABSTRACT

The individual’s sense of “work self” is a complex phenomenon. The cumulative effect of work experiences and academic experiences along with one’s personal interpretation of them is felt strongly in the sense of work self. There is recognition of the importance of people’s sense of work self in career choices and in career success. The important role students’ academic identity plays in post-secondary study success is well recognized, but the importance of the development of work identity in post-secondary education has received little attention. In this chapter, the crucial role work identity plays in career path and success is acknowledged. The author suggests that resume writing, typically viewed merely as a work history, can be used as a powerful tool for creative, critical reflection through which students critically re-examine their previous experiences and ultimately challenge the habits of mind and work self, which has previously defined, and often constrained, them.

INTRODUCTION

Learning is understood as a process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action. (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162).

Courses designed to develop skills in the position application process are commonly found in both vocational colleges and in higher education. Depending on the discipline, many higher education courses include some kind of professional practice course, towards the end of the degree program. Typically, the professional practice course seeks to equip students with the more practical skills in gaining career employment. In vocational colleges similar courses exist and again are designed to assist students to gain
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the skills they need to survive the position application process, and increase their chances of gaining employment. Such courses often teach resume writing, cover letter writing and interview skills.

Resume’s, as we are frequently told by employers, are usually poorly done. They fail to truly convey employee’s capabilities and often suffer from unprofessional, messy layout that goes against the expectations of the ‘genre’, and are riddled with spelling errors. From the perspective of the employer, the resume is merely a tool for them to be able to screen prospective employees and decide if the person is worth investing more time in for an interview. From the perspective of students, the resume is a necessary if not rather boring document on which they will pin their hopes of gaining employment. The same holds true of other position application documents such as cover letters and professional portfolios. Then there’s the interview considerations and skills – a process viewed usually with some trepidation and is focused on getting the position. The whole process of applying for vocational or professional positions in the workforce is viewed as necessary, but tedious, and at times nerve-wracking. Inherent in the process is a power imbalance of sorts. Typically resumes, cover letters and interviews are viewed by those writing them as some kind of ‘examination’ by which they will be judged for their suitability; and the judgment passed to them by prospective employers tends to ‘stick’ as a significant force shaping their own view of themselves. The process of position applications is an emotional mix of hope, worry and fear that perhaps one will not ‘measure up’.

Whether in vocational education or in higher education institutions, the classrooms for courses offering skills in position application skills such as resume writing and interview skills have varied demographics. If the students are young school leavers, then the prospect of embarking on the journey of establishing their careers might be filled with some excitement. Other students may be mature aged students who have been in other forms of employment or doing other things, and now are motivated (usually by negative experiences) to look for something more, for some kind of change in their lives. For these students particularly, as a result of their greater breadth and length of life experiences, they have well established sense of work identity, and that work identity is often inextricably bound with their own sense of self. In contrast the younger school leaver students’ concept of work identity is based mostly on their beliefs about their academic capabilities. Despite the differences in terms of work identity between ‘school leaver students’ and the ‘mature age’ students, courses designed to teach resume writing, interview skills and other employment orientated skills can, and should be, a fulcrum for self-introspection and critical reflection with the end goal of effecting positive transformation in relation to the individual’s sense of self in relation to work.

Sense of work self, or work identity, is a recognised important factor in an individual’s work choices and indeed in their work success. Work identity is greatly influenced by previous work experiences along side other life experiences and the individual’s interpretation of those experiences. There is a growing body of literature around students’ academic identity and the crucial role it plays in academic success but the development of work identity in post-secondary education, has been mostly neglected. Jensen and Jetten (2016) observe that students who have not developed a clear work identity tend to suffer “loss of goal orientation and motivation, uncertainty, stress, and perceived poor academic achievement” (p. 1027). Given the impact of work identity on success and career paths, it is appropriate to place some emphasis its development in post-secondary education. It is proposed in the present paper that the process of resume writing can provide a valuable opportunity to examine and formulate/reformulate students’ work identity in a positive and empowering manner.

The purpose of the present chapter to encourage a shift in paradigm in post school courses (vocational education or higher education) relating to position application skills. Commonly the learning objectives